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**CHILDREN'S PLACE EXPLORATION:  
THE GEOGRAPHIES OF TEN-YEAR OLDS IN NEW  
YORK CITY**

by

HAROUNA BA

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy, The City University of New York

2007

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## **ABSTRACT**

# **CHILDREN'S PLACE EXPLORATION: THE GEOGRAPHIES OF TEN-YEAR OLDS IN NEW YORK CITY**

by

**HAROUNA BA**

**Adviser: Professor Cindi Katz**

This study, conducted in the mid 1990s, focuses on the geographic exploration of ten-year-old children in New York City. It documents and investigates their ways of discovering and learning about different local places in New York City and the factors that influence children's geographic exploration.

These questions are answered by using multiple methodologies. Research methods included open-ended interviews with eighteen 10-year-old children and eighteen parents, child-produced atlases in which they provided information concerning their place exploration in New York City. In addition, each child was given a notebook to record

places he/she remembered between interview sessions. I also conducted informal observations of each child's home and immediate outdoor environments.

This study is concerned with improving children's lives in New York City and thereby more generally urban settings, which possess a contradictory nature as rich places for learning and exploration and as challenging places within which to raise children. It addresses how parents deal with these urban ecologies, and documents the consequences of these urban contradictions for children. As such it has implications for urban design and policies dealing with children's environments; can inform the body of research which examines children's environmental and geographic education under contemporary conditions; and can contribute to curriculum development in social studies that recognizes children's everyday modes of learning, and raises issues of importance to developing teachers' awareness of the urban child's geographic exploration.

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I thank Josephine Imbimbo for introducing me to the field of Environmental Psychology. I would like to thank Judith Kubran and David Chapin, who have offered me countless opportunities to be part of the Environment Psychology community over the years by having made participating in this community such an enjoyable experience. I appreciate

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It would be impossible to write about children's exploration without drawing from the experiences of my children, Ardo, Omar, and Latif. I thank them for their love and teaching me so much about the importance of curiosity and place exploration in children's lives. I'm grateful to Khadija, Tarek and Mustapha, for their support and affection. Khadija provided love and nurturing while I was totally immersed in this work. She never wavered about her support and always helped me prioritize. I'm aware of how much I owe her and will forever be grateful.

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## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

*Our greatest period of geographical exploration is that found in each of us—in our childhood. All children have an urge to explore the landscape around them, to learn about it, to give order to it, and to invest it with meaning—both shared and private (Hart, 1979, p. 3).*

Children’s geographical exploration, the focus of this dissertation, is a crucial aspect of children's everyday life experience and development.<sup>1</sup> Children spend most of their time playing, living, and learning in a number of environmental settings including their homes, others’ homes, schools, commercial spaces, special facilities for children, and various outdoor environments, which have remarkable and also quite mundane effects on their social, intellectual and emotional development. Specifically, the development of children is tied to the acquisition and consolidation of exploratory skills (e.g., naming, ordering, questioning, experimenting, predicting) within and toward the external world. For children growing up in large urban settings, however, the issue is not that simple or linear. The actualization of urban children’s geographical exploration often collides with the everyday realities of cities as unsafe outdoor environments and rich places in terms of cultural and socio-economic diversity that presents a continuously changing landscape. This dissertation documents and examines 10-year-old children’s ways of exploring different local places in New York City; the challenging issues this

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<sup>1</sup> I use the concepts of child and children interchangeably in this dissertation. “We need to be reminded, as Margaret Mead never fails to remind us, that ‘It’s a good thing to think about the child as long as you remember that the child doesn’t exist. Only children exist. Every time we lump them together we lose something.’ It is not just a matter of the enormous differences between individuals. Every child is in a different state of being or becoming” (Ward, 1978, p. vi).

situation presents to the exploring children themselves and to parents in their everyday lives, and how parents and children understand and negotiate this state of affairs from their own perspectives.

## **Basic Premises of This Research**

My interrelated personal and academic interests on the subject of children's place exploration drive the basic premises of this research. First, my personal interest about children's geographical exploration is grounded foremost in my concerns about raising socially and environmentally competent children in New York City. These concerns are better understood in the context of my own childhood exploration of the city. As a child, who grew up in a major urban city in West Africa, I had the opportunity to explore independently and extensively a rich urban outdoor environment from the age of five. I explored the outdoor environment without adult supervision, and rarely alone. I always was in the company of other children from different age groups, and ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, there were few restrictions placed on my use of the outdoor environment. I was required to be home on time for lunch and before it got dark (dusk), and was not allowed to play on neighborhood streets, which were dense with car traffic. This geographic freedom allowed me to learn about and make sense of a fourteen square miles area around my house at an early age, and explore different neighborhoods and natural ecologies (e.g., ocean, farm lands, sand dunes) in my borough. The purpose of most of my exploration with friends was done just for fun. I firmly believe that when given the opportunity to explore city landscapes, urban children benefit from a rich social, cultural, and economic diversity, which is often not existent in rural and suburban

communities. As a parent, who is raising his children in New York City, however, I felt that my children, who exhibited constantly the need and urge to explore independently the outdoor environment, would not have the same degree of freedom to explore the city that I enjoyed as a child because of the real and perceived safety issues that we, as parents, have about New York City and the need to make sure that our children are safe through frequent supervision. As a result of these experiences, I wanted to know more about how children growing up in an urban environment like New York City engage in geographical exploratory activities, and how their parents deal with the process.

Second, my academic interest on the subject of children's geographical exploration is grounded in the recognition of its importance in childhood as a learning and inquiry tool, and its different forms/manifestations depending on a range of individual, social, environmental, economic, and political factors. As the epigraph above makes clear, geographical exploration is an important dimension of most children's learning and development through their need to exert some forms of control over the everyday physical and social environment. Children's place exploration is part of their search for information and stimulation; and is the outcome of a delicate balance between the self and the stimuli coming from the physical and social world around them. The outcomes of exploration for children include pleasure and fun, danger and fear, risk-taking, preference and appreciation, understanding and increased knowledge, a sense of ecological mastery, place identity, and self-confidence. As such exploration is a crucial aspect of children's geographic experience and development (Aitken, 1994; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1990). The concept of geographical exploration contributes to our understanding

of what it means to be a developing child in a specific place (New York City) and time (the mid-1990s).

The context of children's place exploration in the city is multifaceted, and requires looking at the factors affecting their geographical experiences from different perspectives. For example, the extent to which children use any environment is likely to depend on their parents' conceptions of what a safe and good place is for their children, the physical characteristics of the environment, social and economic forces, and the child's personal attitudes and feelings about various settings, past geographic experiences, and individual abilities. Many factors, including social, cultural, economic and political conditions, play a role in the ways in which children explore the environment. Household demographics, the characteristics of available environments, parents' and children's conceptions of safety and danger, residential location, and childrearing practices as well as the differential treatment of boys and girls, help to create the context for children's exploration of places in the city (Chawla, 2002; Harloff, Simone & Eybisch, 1998). The impact of these factors on children's exploration has led to children spending an increasing amount of time in indoor environments. "As cities develop, there is a tendency for children to be increasingly contained" (Hart, 2002, p. 135). Several explanations have been provided for this state of affairs, including road/street dangers, crime, bullying, youth curfew and surveillance in open places, budget cuts in public spending for recreational and educational programs (public parks, museums, playgrounds), parents' perceptions of danger and fears for their children, the increased presence of technologies such as computers, electronic games, and video games in the home, and increased commercialization of children's play-space (Aitken, 1994 &

2001; Halloway & Valentine, 2000; Hart, 2002; Katz, 1993, 1994 & 1998; McKendrick, Bradford & Fielder, 2000; Skelton & Valentine, 1998; Wridt, 2004). To further understand exploration of urban childhood in the context of these factors, more research is still needed (Hart, 1998; Middlebrooks, 1998). The need for further research about urban childhood is made even more cogent with increased urbanization in industrialized (and non-industrialized countries, and the limited access to open spaces for children's play and exploration in so many cities (Chawla, 2002; Hart, 2002).

Drawing from my personal concerns as a parent and wanting to contribute to a better understanding of the experiences and ecologies of children's urban exploration, I provide an analysis of (1) the various local places that a sample of eighteen 10-year-old children experience in the city; and (2) the environmental, social and individual factors that influence their ways of finding out and learning about places in New York City. As such, I seek to understand children's geographical exploration, and contribute to the growing field concerned with urban childhood, which has focused on how urban environments can be designed to support children's experiences, development and learning from an interdisciplinary approach (Bartlett, Hart, Satterthwaite, de la Barra & Missair, 1999; Chawla, 2002; Gorlitz, Harloff, Mey & Valsiner, 1998; Hart, 1986 & 2002; Katz, 1994 & 1998; Lynch, 1976; Moore, 1990; Satterthwaite, Hart, Levy, Mitlin, Ross, Smit & Stephens, 1996; Ward, 1978). In addition, this work contributes to our understanding of children's exploration and development for learning and teaching purposes; informs the improvement of curriculum to recognize children's modes of learning in different settings; raises issues of importance to the urban child's geographic

experiences; and suggests directions for future research. The premises of this research are further explored in the Literature Review section.

## **Research Approach**

My research questions and approach to the issues of children's geographical exploration in everyday life raise the problem of ecological validity, which "speaks to the question of how to analyze behavior-in-context and how to compare behaviors across activity systems ... [while maintaining] the integrity of the real-life situations it is designed to investigate; [being] faithful to the larger social and cultural contexts from which the subjects come; [and being] consistent with participants' definition of the situation" (Cole, 1996, pp. 223-226; see also Bronfenbrenner, 1979 & 1986; Winkel, 1985). Researchers studying children's experience of the environment have been able to implement and satisfy these conditions, and thus, address the issue of generalizability by tying their findings based on the experiences of children in one specific setting to the lives of children in other settings and cultures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 & 1986; Hart, 1979; Katz, 2004; Moore, 1990). In this study, I draw from these researchers, and my personal experience to follow as closely as possible the three characteristics of an ecologically valid research approach as outlined above to inform my research design and methodology, which adopts an interdisciplinary research approach.

This dissertation employs a qualitative and multi-method approach focusing on the different levels of analysis to understand the complexity of children's place exploration and factors that affect children's exploration of the city. The research methods included open-ended interviews with children and parents, and child-produced

atlases in which they provided information concerning their place exploration in New York City. In addition, I provided each child with a notebook to record places that they remembered between interview sessions, and conduct informal observations of each child's home and immediate outdoor environments.

## **Research Setting**

The research in this dissertation was conducted in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn, New York City, and thus, is primarily a neighborhood-based study. Before describing the research study site area, it is important to clarify what I mean by the concept of *neighborhood*. It encompasses geographic, economic, political, and social/cultural dimensions, has many meanings and uses, which are continuously being debated and refined (Pebley & Vaiana, 2002; Wood, 1985). I use it to refer to the group of buildings in the immediate vicinity of children's houses, including residential areas and streets, local institutions (e.g., church, school, or social agencies), parks and other outdoors (e.g., stores, playgrounds), as well as the qualities of these places in terms of safety measures, play equipment and activities and spaces for group as well as individual interactions (Harloff et al., 1998; Moore et al. 1985; Pebley & Vaiana, 2002; Wood, 1985; Wridt, 2004). It is the physical and social space where "the child's so-called home range is located" (Harloff et al., 1998, p. 59), and children hang out (Wood, 1985). Mead (1985) talked about the neighborhood as a spatial habitat for the satisfaction of children's basic physiological needs as well as social and environmental needs such as social attachment, familiarity and continuity, autonomy and confidence, and capacity for exploration. "Children need neighborhoods that convey a sense of human continuity, that

are familiar and trustworthy but where strangeness and danger can be encountered, too; they need to move on their own two legs, take chances, seek multisensory stimulation, experience their non-human surroundings and acquire a capacity for innovation in a dynamic world – a classic statement of neighborhood-as-habitat” (Mead, 1985, p. 3).

This dissertation is focused on 10-year-old children living in Park Slope, which is one of the six neighborhoods comprising Community District 6. With a population of over 102,000 residents, District 6 is ethnically and economically diverse: 54.8% White, 15.9% Afro-American, 25.6% Latino, and 3.2% Asian. The median household income in the district is \$49,233. Twenty percent of the population in District 6 is under the age of 18, and is ethnically diverse: 13% White, 28% Afro-American, 29% Latino, and 19% Asian (New York City Department of City Planning, 1996). Park Slope does not reflect the ethnic and economic diversity of Community District 6. It houses the majority of the white families in District 6. These white families in Park Slope have the smallest number of children under the age of 18 as compared to the Afro-American, Latino, and Asian families in the District. Most of the participants in my study were from white middle class families and reflected the majority of the population in the neighborhood (see Chapter Three for more details).

Park Slope has a rich diversity of resources in terms of its social, cultural, economic, architectural, and educational assets for children and families. What I refer to as Park Slope for the purpose of my study is nestled among four distinct neighborhoods: Boerum Hill, Gowanus, Sunset Park, and Prospect Heights, and a large park: Prospect Park (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Park Slope Neighborhood within Community District 6



The neighborhoods of Boerum Hill and Gowanus are located to the northwest of Park Slope, but are very different from each other in terms of ethnic, socio-economic, and building characteristics. While Boerum Hill is a residential enclave of brownstones for professionals and seniors and enjoys the lowest unemployment levels (3.1%) in the district, the Gowanus neighborhood is a mix of residential, commercial, and industrial buildings, has the second highest unemployment rate (12.5%) in the district and more than 39 percent of its households has incomes below the federally defined poverty level, and the majority of its residents live in two public housing projects: Gowanus and Wyckoff Gardens Houses (New York City Department of City Planning, 1996).

Sunset Park is located to the southwest of Park Slope, and is part of Community District 7. Twenty five percent of Community District 7 residents live at or below poverty level. Sunset Park is a residential area near a large industrial zone that is home to a large Latino immigrant population, and a Chinese immigrant population, who live in an area of the neighborhood considered the third largest Chinatown in New York City (New York City Department of City Planning, 1996).

Located on the northeast of Park Slope, Prospect Heights is part of Community District 8, which is over 80% native-born African-American and West Indian immigrants, and has the highest percentage (28.2%) of families living at or below poverty level in Brooklyn. Twenty seven percent of the population of Community District 8 receive some forms of income support (e.g., public assistance, supplemental security income), and about 35 percent of families with children under five and 45 percent of female-headed families with children live in poverty. As a microcosm of the District,

Prospect Heights is a residential neighborhood with a high level of unemployment (New York City Department of City Planning, 1996).

As I discuss further in the subsequent chapters, some parents in this study perceived some of the adjacent neighborhoods (e.g., Gowanus, Sunset Park, and Prospect Heights) as a drain on their neighborhood resources such as playgrounds and a nuisance in terms of safety issues. These negative perceptions of these poor neighborhoods and residents play a role in children's exploration of the city.

At the southwest of Park Slope lies one of the largest parks in New York City. Prospect Park is 536 acres of land (2 km<sup>2</sup>) and has a zoo, a lake, a skating ring, picnic grounds, baseball diamonds, horseback riding, a boathouse, ponds, a bandstand, playgrounds, a Merry-Go-Round, jogging and bicycling lanes, etc. It plays the role of the neighborhood's backyard, and is visited by residents of all the nearby areas.

Park Slope is geographically the largest neighborhood in Community District 6. It houses more than half of the district's total population (50,000), and has a more ethnically and economically diverse population than the rest of the district. It has the second largest gay and lesbian population in New York City. Most of its residents are professionals, artists, craftspeople, students and seniors, and its median household income is \$56,179. Most of its businesses are locally owned. It offers a safe, pleasant, and rich educational outdoor environment to its residents, especially children and their families. In addition to its historic buildings, it offers access to many educational landmarks such as the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn Children's Museum, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and New York City Transit Museum, which are all within easy walking distance and public transportation access from Park

Slope. Access to public transportation is convenient because of the many routes of the New York City Subway and Bus system serving the neighborhood (New York City Department of City Planning, 1996). Reported crimes (e.g., murder, robbery, assault, burglary, and grand larceny) in the neighborhood have declined since the early 1990s (see Table 1). For example, there was a drop of 67% in reported crimes between 1993 and 2003 in the neighborhood. This decline was also observed in the overall percentage (68%) of crime in New York City during the same period (New York City Police Department CompStat Unit, 2005). This might be explained by increased police presence in the streets of the city, and community involvement in creating safe environment for their residents.

Table 1: Reported Crimes in New York City

Geographic Areas	Number of Reported Crimes		Percentage Change
	1993	2003	
Community District 6	3,505	1,158	- 66.98
Citywide	430,460	139,610	- 67.57

Source: New York City Police Department CompStat Unit (2005)

Overall, many parents in Park Slope perceived their neighborhood to be “ideal” for raising their children because of its relative safety status and rich cultural, economic, and natural resources. As a resident of Park Slope and a parent, I also felt that Park Slope was an ideal setting to study children’s exploration of their neighborhood and the city, and the factors that affect these experiences.

## **Structure of The Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into the following seven chapters: Chapter Two reviews the literature on childhood and place exploration, which includes the main philosophical conceptions of childhood, psychological and educational theories about children's exploration, and studies about children's place exploration. It concludes with a summary of the theoretical frameworks that are useful in helping me understand the experiences and ecologies of children's transactions with the urban environment.

Chapter Three outlines my research design and methodology. It describes the context of my research, the neighborhood in which the study was conducted, the selection of my participants, the profiles of participating families, the research instruments, and the data analysis process. It closes with a discussion of the limitations of the study.

Chapter Four presents my findings on children's understanding of the importance of place exploration in their lives and definition of what it means to be an independent place explorer in a complex urban setting. It also provides a description of the different types of urban explorers I encountered in my study.

Chapter Five focuses on children's place exploration from their own points of view as well as those of their parents, outlines the important factors affecting children's exploration of the city.

Chapter Six examines parents' perceptions about the city as a place to raise their children and strategies about how to best support their children's independent exploration of the city. It focuses on the positive and negative aspects of the city for children from the parents' standpoint, and ends with a discussion of the different dimensions of parents'

strategies in attempting to raise healthy and independent explorers of the outdoor urban environment.

Chapter Seven is all about rules. It shows the centrality of indoor and outdoor rules in children's exploration of the environment, especially the relationship between family rules and children's exploration of their neighborhood.

Chapter Eight presents conclusions about children's place exploration in the city, and outlines the implications of my study in three areas: urban planning and design, education, and research.

I conclude with a contemporary counterpoint to this study. Because the data reported here were collected ten years ago, I wanted to return to the concerns they raise in New York City at present. Drawing on my experiences as the parent of a ten-year-old son, I close with a postscript on his place exploration.

## CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed for this dissertation examines the evolution and connection between childhood and place exploration, and draws critically from diverse fields, including philosophy, education, psychology, geography, urban design, sociology, and anthropology. It informs my perspective about children's place exploration, and helps me to identify the key factors that influence children's exploration of places. To frame urban children's exploration of their environment from an interdisciplinary perspective, I draw from (1) philosophical discussions about the *importance* of exploration in children's development, (2) multiple perspectives about children's *exploration* and *development*, (3) studies of children's *place* exploration, and (4) a life space and territorial range model of *urban* children's place exploration.

### **Early Recognitions of the Importance of Children's Exploration**

The early recognition of the importance of children's exploration grew out of the new ideas in philosophy about human development and the structure of the mind, which were being discussed and debated in Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. These early philosophies, precursors of conceptions of modern childhood as separate from adulthood and of the importance of childhood development and education, included the work of Locke (1632-1704), Hume (1711-1776), Spinoza (1632-1677), Leibniz (1646-1716), Kant (1724-1804), Darwin (1809-1882), and Rousseau (1712-1778); and of educational theorists and practitioners like Pestolozzi (1746-1827). Common threads in this body of

work are that the ways children were perceived and treated were inadequate, and the proposition that there was a need to formulate broad characteristics of children's personalities as separate aspects of human beings with special needs for their care and education. I will focus on the aspects of these works dealing with children's exploration in the context of development and education developed by Locke and Rousseau, which are connected to theories developed later on by behaviorists (Watson and colleagues), psychoanalysts (Freud and colleagues), constructivists (Piaget and colleagues), social-culturalists (Vygostky and colleagues), and educational theorists and practitioners (Froebel and Dewey).

In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1692/1989), Locke postulated that the mind of a child is similar to a blank slate (*tabula rasa*), which can be shaped by experience, physical care, and the child's social world. He believed that improving the contexts and environments of children could positively influence their development, and advocated for an equitable balance between freedom and authority. Locke thought of children's curiosity as natural and defined it as a search for knowledge. He advised parents and caregivers to foster children's curiosity thus: (1) "Not to check or discountenance *any Enquiries* he shall make, ...; (2) [provide] some peculiar ways of *Commendation*...; (3) *never* receive *Deceitful* and *Eluding* answers [to their inquiries]...; and (4) excite their Curiosity, by bringing strange and new things in their way, on purpose to engage their Enquiry, ..." (Locke, 1693/1965, pp. 69-71). He recommended that the role of parents is to pay attention and give affection to children, who were generally conceived at the time as little devils, as inherently naughty, unruly, un-socialized beings. "The great work of a governor is to fashion the carriage and form the

mind. To settle in his pupil 'good' habits and the principle of virtue and wisdom. To give him little by little a view of mankind, and work him into a love and imitation of what is excellent and praiseworthy, and, in the prosecution of it, to give him vigour, activity and industry" (Locke, 1693/1965, p. 70). His ultimate educational goal as an empiricist was "to produce rational adult men out of immature children" (Greenleaf, 1978, p. 62), that is, to teach the child to gain control of his or her natural impulses through training and conditioning. A new school of behaviorism, which emerged at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and became popular in the 1930s (e.g., Hull, 1943; Skinner, 1938), drew from the empiricist approach to children's learning by defining it "as a process of forming connections between stimuli and response" (Brandsford, Brown & Cocking, 2000, p. 6; see also Pelligrino et al., 2001). The behaviorist approach has been discussed further in my reviews of the empirical studies on children's exploration.

In *Emile* (1762/1979), Rousseau postulated more radically than Locke that children (1) can develop naturally with little interference from adults, (2) have the capacity to adapt to their environment as they develop, and (3) have an active relationship with their environment (Claperede, 1912; Rousseau, 1763/1965). He viewed children as possessing innate purity, an intuitive notion of morality, growing natural impulses, and an infinite level of adaptability to different environmental demands. Calling on the special abilities and needs of children, he perceived them as actively engaged in the world to further their own purposes and understanding, and did not see them as miniature adults or as blank slates at the mercy of adults' projects. According to Rousseau, the child should be carefully nurtured through education by identifying and drawing on the special nature of childhood. "Nature wants children to be children before they are men. If we

deliberately pervert this order, we shall get premature fruits which are neither ripe nor well-flavored, and which soon decay .... Childhood has ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling peculiar to itself; nothing can be more foolish than to substitute our ways for them” (Rousseau, 1762/1979, p. 53). Rousseau’s perspective about the child as an active learning agent influenced the work of psychologists such as the constructivist Piaget and the socio-culturalist Vygostky, as well as education theorists and practitioners such as Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Dewey. The constructivist, socio-culturalist, and progressive educational perspectives define the child as an active explorer of the social and physical environment, and emphasize to different degrees the importance of a social and cultural scaffolding process to support children’s meaningful exploration of the environment. The constructivist, socio-culturalist, and progressive educational approaches have been discussed further in my review of the empirical studies on children’s exploration and the environment.

The work of Locke and Rousseau established the theoretical recognition of children as individuals with their own needs, abilities, and developmental trajectories. Their ideas had great impact on the fields of psychology and education. “The empiricist philosophy of Locke made the child interesting as an object of epistemological study and the educational innovations of Rousseau and Pestalozzi made him as interesting ... as an object of pedagogical study” (Kessen, 1965, p. 112). It is to the empirical studies of children’s exploration and development that I now turn.

## **Multiple Perspectives About Children's Exploration and Development**

The studies of children's exploration and development include different perspectives: exploration as an (1) intrinsically motivated behavior rooted in instinctual and libidinal energies influenced dramatically by the child's immediate social environment, (2) extrinsically motivated behavior which helps the child to know and to interpret new stimuli or objects, and (3) active engagement with the everyday social and physical environment.

### **Exploration as Instinctual and Libidinal Energies**

The concept of exploration in the psychoanalytic approach represented by Freud (1949; see also Brill, 1966) and colleagues (see Bowlby, 1972; Rheingold, 1969; Spitz, 1945; Welker, 1956) is an intrinsically motivated behavior rooted in instinctual and libidinal energies. The psychoanalysts not only talked about children's sexual drives and how they affect their personalities, but also articulated the importance of childhood as a critical foundation for adult mental health in modern life (Greenleaf, 1978). They emphasized the importance of healthy close ties between parent and child, and recommended that modern society pay close attention to children's early social, physical, emotional, and mental needs. In the late 1960s, child and developmental psychologists influenced by psychoanalytic theories of instincts or libidinal energies developed and relied heavily upon experimental methodologies to study exploratory behaviors (Gorlitz & Wohlwill, 1987; Hutt, 1970 & 1966; Nunnally & Lemond, 1973; Voss & Keller,

1983). These psychologists suggested that people's instincts or libidinal energies were ultimately responsible for all human activity, including exploratory behavior. These energies drive human beings to explore objects, events or people. Exploration occurs in response to satisfying libidinal drives. According to Keller (1987), instincts are a type of "intrinsically motivated behavior," that is, "behavior that is performed for its own sake ... independently of any external reinforcement" (p. 33). Researchers built on these earliest conceptualizations of exploration to extend Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation of human relationships to the external world (see Ainsworth & Wittig, 1970; Bowlby, 1988 & 1969; Murphy, 1962; Schachtel, 1959; Spitz, 1945).

Schachtel (1959) advanced an interesting developmental perspective on exploration. "Schachtel observed that, in contrast to Freud's conception of pleasure as the cessation of tension, the young of all higher species show an eager appetite for sensory exploration and discovery, which serves not only survival but intrinsic satisfaction" (Chawla, 1992, p. 70). Schachtel suggested that children's early mode of interaction with environmental stimuli was initially centered on affective gratification, and that as they age they aim to satisfy primary informational goals. He proposed two modes of response to stimuli and objects: an "autocentric" and "allocentric" mode. The former, dependent on the senses of taste, touch, and smell, is an inclination towards stimulation-directed behavior. The allocentric mode, dependent on our auditory and visual senses, aims at obtaining information about the stimuli. He observed that the allocentric mode gradually dominates the autocentric mode. Moreover, he indicated that these modalities of exploration are not exclusive to children but are also present in adults' perception and experience. Even though a discussion of children's verbal abilities to interrogate the

world as a form of exploratory activity was missing in his approach, Schachtel's affective and informational modes are relevant to understanding the types of children's exploratory activities in relation to specific milieus.

Influenced by Freud, psychoanalysts were "making observations of the ill effects on personality development of prolonged institutional care and/or frequent changes of the mother-figure during the early years of life" (Bowlby, 1988, pp. 20-21). During the 1940s and early 1950s, there was an increase in the number of children living in institutional settings like hospitals (Rivlin & Wolfe, 1985), and as such, in much of this literature, exploratory behaviors were linked more to the quality of the child's social environment and less to his or her physical environment. For example, Spitz's (1945) classic studies of institutionalized infants found that those who were deprived of human contact, particularly a mother-figure, for a prolonged period of time did not engage in exploratory behavior with toys or objects. Based on this work, psychoanalysts concluded that children would not explore the outside world or objects if they had experienced an "abnormal" emotional relationship with their mother.

Subsequent research on "new or strange situations" demonstrated that even short-term absences of the mother put "normal" infants in a non-exploratory mood because of the high level of anxiety caused by the mother's absence (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1970; Murphy, 1962; Spitz, 1945). The researchers found that infants would approach and play with new toys or people only when the mother was present. When she was absent they would not explore and got anxious and agitated.

Bowlby's work (1988, 1980, 1973, 1969), also grounded in psychoanalytic theories, found that the mother's presence as a necessary condition for the manifestation

of infants' exploration of objects and the outside world. His work on attachment, and more recent conceptions of the child's social environment, expanded the narrow "mother-infant" definition to include other individuals who might have a significant relationship to the child. He defined attachment behavior as "any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world" (Bowlby, 1988, pp. 26-27).

Therefore, social attachment (or "secure base") and familiarity were seen to play an important role in children's well-being and ability to venture into their immediate environment.

*When an individual (of any age) is feeling secure he is likely to explore away from his attachment figure. When alarmed, anxious, tired, or unwell he feels an urge towards proximity. Thus we see the typical pattern of interaction between child and parent known as exploration from a secure base, first described by Ainsworth (1967). Provided the parent is known to be accessible and will be responsive when called upon, a healthy child feels secure enough to explore. At first these explorations are limited both in time and space. Around the middle of the third year, however, a secure child begins to become confident enough to increase time and distance away - first to half-days and later to whole days. As he grows into adolescence, his excursions are extended to weeks or months, but a secure home base remains indispensable nonetheless for optimal functioning and mental health (Bowlby, 1988, pp. 122-23).*

These psychoanalytic-based theories of social attachment have contributed to an understanding of the relationships between infants and young children's attachment to the mother-figure and exploratory behaviors, and posits that children's social environment is critical in understanding their exploratory behaviors. Furthermore, it shows that children may have different exploratory tendencies/styles based on early attachment experiences. Focusing on how 10-year old children interact with and rely on parents, siblings, peers, or

caretakers in order to learn to become more independent explorers of places in a rich and challenging urban setting, the present study will draw from these concepts to provide a framework for examining children's ways of finding out about different kinds of places.

### **Exploration As An Extrinsically Motivated Behavior**

The key tenets in the behaviorist camp, influenced by the empiricists, are Watson (1919, 1930), Skinner (1938), Thorndike (1931), and Hull (1943), who advanced the idea that the child's environment shapes learning and behavior; in fact, human behavior, development, and learning are conceptualized as basic reactions to the stimuli in the environment. In the behaviorist view, the stimulus-response associations form the sole basis of children's knowledge acquisition and accumulation processes. Reinforcement through training is the primary mechanism that supports children's learning. In such a context, the child is a passive learner/explorer of the external world (Brandsford et al., 2000; Pelligrino et al., 2001). This approach to knowledge acquisition informed the work of psychologists such as Barnett (1958), Berlyne (1966 & 1960), Fowler (1965), and White (1959) who were interested in understanding the processes involved in exploratory behaviors. They dealt precisely with concepts of relevance for the study of exploratory behaviors as a means by which children deal with the environment and/or acquire knowledge about it (e.g., Gorlitz & Wohlwill, 1987; Hutt, 1970 & 1966; Nunnally & Lemond, 1973; Voss & Keller, 1983). They argued that human or animal exploration is motivated by the degree of stimulation in the external environment and the organism's ability to deal with it. Such "extrinsically motivated behavior is performed to receive external reinforcement that is attainable only through that behavior" (Keller, 1987, p. 33).

In *Curiosity and exploratory behavior*, Fowler (1965) indicated that the human organism is constantly responding to and searching for information on "all levels of functioning, neural and behavioral ..." (p. 74). Human organisms strive "naturally" for variation and change. Human activities such as "idle thought and occasional daydream, formal entertainment and light amusement, problem solution and invention, play and sports, knowledge and education, art and humor [are] forms of "*epistemic*" curiosity and "*playful*" exploration" (Fowler, 1965, p. 75; italics are mine). They show that human organisms need, search for, and process information.

Berlyne (1966) looked at animals' behaviors of observation, inspection, and manipulation in order to explain the modalities of exploration among humans. Although he was not interested in children's exploration, his distinction between "specific" and "diversive" exploration was an important one. For him, "specific" exploration consisted of searching for precise information due to inadequate information or a condition of discomfort. "Diversive" exploration occurred when there was a search for stimulation that provided novelty, surprise, complexity, change, or variety (p. 26). Berlyne's definition of exploration shows that it is difficult to draw a clear line between intrinsic and extrinsic exploratory behavior. According to Berlyne (1966), "what is explored and how depends on many factors inside and outside the organism" (p. 153). In recent years, Keller (1987) cautioned that "one would do best to avoid too strict (and artificial) a conceptual division between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation when studying exploratory behavior" (p. 38). However, Berlyne's concept of diversive exploration was subsequently used and developed by child psychologists to define children's play as the absence of

tension and focus on objects (e.g. Gorlitz & Wohlwill, 1987; Hughes & Hutt, 1979; Hutt, 1970 & 1966).

Influenced by Berlyne's concept of diversive exploration, child psychologists looked at exploration as it related to play and development. Exploration was seen as a system of information processing, perception, storage, and attention that developed from children's early orientation in the environment, perceptual investigation, and play (Keller, 1987; Voss, 1987). Exploration was understood as a way of knowing and interpreting new stimuli or objects that confront the individual. It began as an "inspective" behavior used by children to learn about the environment and resulted in mastery and leisure (play activity). In this context, exploratory behavior is defined as a drive to reduce stimulation from the outside world. The exploratory process led to the elimination of tension and the satisfaction of curiosity and, as a result, the appearance of joy and pleasure, and became an important recursive step in children's knowledge acquisition and mastery of the environment or objects around them.

The above findings about exploration, derived mainly from the psychoanalytic and behaviorist approaches to child development, can be used as a first step in attempting to understand the different ways children find out and learn about different kinds of places, and to develop more environmental approaches to children's place exploration. The relevant findings can be summarized into the following three ideas: Exploration (1) functions as a reduction or elimination mechanism of tensions generated by the need to survive, (2) satisfies one's curiosity about stimuli present in the external environment, and (3) is supported and facilitated by members in the child's immediate social environment.

Both of the approaches described above (psychoanalytic and behaviorist) are similar in (a) their treatment of children as passive objects of study; and/or (b) their use of controlled settings (i.e. laboratory, hospital) to study attachment, control, equilibrium, and exploratory behaviors. None of the children included in these studies nor their parents were given an opportunity to voice their personal experiences of exploration.

Making inferences from experimental and laboratory studies of exploration to children's experiences in "everyday" environments is problematic and questionable in terms of generalization. In particular, the characteristics of the controlled settings (i.e. laboratory, hospital) had little significance in how exploratory behaviors were analyzed and interpreted. Exploration was defined without links to any physical and social context, and as a simple and mechanical behavior driven by a basic search for stimuli. It is apparent that the possibilities for children's exploration would be more limited in a laboratory, for example, than in the context of their own home and outside their home environments. Home and other naturalistic environments afford different stimulations and information for children's exploration. Furthermore, if exploratory behaviors are essentially "spontaneous" behaviors (Gorlitz, 1987, pp. 109-110), it makes little sense to observe them in controlled settings. "Much of the research on exploratory activity [was] confined to studies of 'voluntary looking time' in response to stimuli presented to a subject whose only choice [was] to look at a stimulus or to refrain from doing so" (Wohlwill, 1987, p. 6; see also Gorlitz & Wohlwill, 1987). These perspectives about exploratory activity uniformly ignore how the specific physical characteristics of the environment can account for or influence exploratory behavior. The child's abilities and physical environment are left unspecified and general -- seemingly unimportant to the

child's exploration. The importance of children's abilities and the environment is addressed by White in his hallmark critical review of the concept of competence (1959) and the role of the qualities of the physical and social environment in the process of discovery are specified by Lynch (1963, 1981).

White (1959) challenges the theories of motivation put forth by the behaviorists and psychoanalysts, and proposes a concept of competence strongly associated with exploration and the environment. He argued that the accepted theories of motivation based on basic animal instincts and drives such as hunger, thirst, or sex, which were developed in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are limited in their abilities to explain human exploration. In his indepth and critical review of the existing literature, he proposed the concept of "effectance" as the motivational aspects and processes of competence. To learn how to deal with the environment and affect it, according to White (1959), a person has to develop learned skills, which include motility and sense of industry, anticipation, and exploration of novel places and objects; and deploy such broad motives as curiosity, perception, manipulation and construction, mastery, communication, and achievement. Furthermore, this "feeling of efficacy" or "effectance motivation may lead to continuing exploratory interests or active adventures when in fact there is no longer any gain in actual competence or any need for it in terms of survival" (White, 1959, p. 323). The development of human competence as defined by White (1959) is critical to understanding the concept of children's place exploration. In addition to facilitating the development of children's environmental competence and increasing their place knowledge, the opportunity to explore rich, varied places seems to strengthen children's cognitive, social, and motor skills (Moore, 1990; Weinstein & David, 1987).

For example, Pines (1973) found that children given more freedom to explore the outdoor environment exhibited a greater level of social and intellectual competence in the classroom and schoolyard than children who had been limited in their exploration of the physical and social environment.

Kevin Lynch's use of the concept of discovery, which makes use of the qualities of urban public spaces (1981, 1963; see also Carr, Francis, Rivlin, and Stone, 1992), is also relevant to understanding the different meanings produced out of our interactions with the physical environment. The experience of discovery in the context of urban public spaces provides the following affordances: (1) the opportunity to observe activities and unusual dimensions of the designed space while walking through it, (2) experience of continuous changes in both the social and physical environment, (3) enjoyment in the contrast and juxtaposition of design elements, (4) a sense of puzzlement or mystery, and (5) transformation in the use of known and familiar places. In addition, "the need for discovery often is met by travel, going to new places to discover their special qualities, to meet new people, to find new challenges from landscapes that contrast with familiar ones" (Carr, Francis, Rivlin & Stone, 1992, p. 136). This last dimension is totally aligned with what I refer to as "place exploration" in my study and is addressed in relationship to children's physical and social development in the constructivist, socio-cultural, and progressive educational frameworks reviewed in the next section.

### **Exploration As An Active Engagement With The External World**

Although their theories differ in important ways, the constructivists, socio-culturalists, and progressive educators dealt more directly and forcefully with children's

active exploration in the context of their social and physical environment than the psychoanalysts and behaviorists. They recognized the importance of the child as a whole human being with specific needs, and children's everyday experiences in formal as well as informal settings in their development. Building on and extending the recognition of children's agency postulated by their predecessors, they demonstrated how children construct and co-construct their own intellectual and emotional development through active engagement with their social and physical environment (Brandsford et al., 2000; Cole, 1996; Cole, Engestrom & Vasquez, 1997; Pellegrino et al., 2001). In this work, two ways of conceptualizing exploration predominate: (1) exploration as a cognitive tool for children's development, and (2) exploration as a pedagogical tool to bridge children's learning in schools and everyday settings.

### **Exploration as a cognitive tool**

Exploration is a tool for learning. Children gradually explore their environment through the development of problem-solving, collaboration, and inquiry skills. The development of these exploratory processes leads to increased knowledge and environmental competence.

*Armed with new methodologies, psychologists began to accumulate a substantial body of data about the remarkable abilities that young children possess that stands in stark contrast to the older emphases on what they lacked. It is now known that very young children are competent, active agents of their own conceptual development. In short, the mind of the young child has come to life (Brandsford et al., 2000, p. 80).*

Within this work, two main psychological approaches that have evolved to address the relationships between children's cognition and development, include: (1) Constructivism which is associated with the Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget and colleagues (Claperede & Inhelder among others), and (2) socio-cultural theory (often referred to as cultural historical activity theory) developed by the Russian developmental psychologist Lev Vygostky and colleagues (Leontiev & Luria among others).

The work of the constructivists reveals how new knowledge forms in the sequence of developmental changes (Brandsford et al., 2000; Chapman, 1988; Gruber & Voneche, 1977; Hart & Moore, 1971). The constructivists believed that children are active in shaping their own development through the modification and transformation of the environment around them, and construct successively higher levels of knowledge by actively striving to master their environment. This exploratory process occurs through "assimilation" (the incorporation of the external world into already-structured schemas), "accommodation" (the re-adjustment of schemas to the external world), and "equilibration" (the coordination of assimilation and accommodation). Hart (1979) and Moore (1990) applied these concepts to the development of children's territorial range in the course of exploration to show the interaction between children's place exploration and development.

*Range evolution involves two interlocking processes. The first is range growth, which occurs in spurts as new lumps of territory are discovered for the first time (assimilated) and mark new range boundaries. The second is range development. With every visit to the same place, with every repeated "play episode," new possibilities are discovered, tested and verified, and provide an accumulation of experience, knowledge and*

*understanding of the environment (accommodation) that builds with time (Moore, 1990, p. 18).*

In the constructivist approach, children's capabilities at different age levels are also critical in understanding how they interact and explore their environment in the course of their development. The constructivists believed that the environment does not influence children in the same way at all ages, and sought consistency in the sequence of developmental changes in children. They argued that the influences of the environment depend on the child's current stage of development. My project focuses on 10-year-old children. According to Piaget, 7- to 12-year-old children are at the concrete operational stage of cognitive development. They are considered capable of logical thought, and can differentiate and coordinate different points of view independent of themselves. This constructivist view of children's exploration as a developmental transition from one form of knowledge to another encompasses two more factors: the physical environment, and the social environment. "The human being is immersed right from birth in a social environment which affects him just as much as his physical environment. Society, even more, in a sense, than the physical environment, changes the very structure of the individual.... Every relation between individuals literally modifies them..." (Piaget, 1973, p. 156). However, "[Piaget's] theory largely attributes children's progress in developing mental capacities, such as conceptual understanding, to their own independent experiences and discoveries" (Stetsenko & Arieviditch, 2002, p. 86). Constructivism has been criticized for having paid more attention to children's abstract thought than to how the cultural and socio-economic environment influences their developmental changes (Brandsford et al., 2000).

In contrast to the constructivist approach to children's exploration and development, the socio-cultural perspective postulates that culture is critical in understanding children's development and exploration of their environment. Culture mediates biological and environmental factors through the interaction of the following conditions: (1) the co-construction of development because children and their caretakers are active agents in the process of development; (2) the variation in individuals' performances as they move from one kind of activity to another; and (3) the dependence of children's developmental changes on cultural-historical circumstances. Children's behaviors directed toward a better understanding of the world around them are conceived as a series of mediated practical activities in a cultural and social context. Cultural artifacts such as tools and practices such as language, mediate these activities in what Vygostky (1978) called the Zone of Proximal Development, which he defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Children learn how to think through their participation in tasks and use of cultural (both conceptual and material) tools (such as language or a ruler), which are provided to them by others in the Zone of Proximal Development. In the course of such exploration, which works in part through communication and problem solving in the Zone of Proximal Development, the child gains greater understanding and knowledge about their world (see Brandsford et al., 2000; Cole et al., 2001; Pellegrino et al., 2001; Vygostky, 1978; Wells & Claxton, 2002). Conceived as an exploratory zone where elders and children negotiate the physical and social environment, the Zone of Proximal Development is a useful concept for framing

the tensions inherent in urban children's interest in exploring their surroundings, and the challenging issues it presents to children and parents in their everyday lives.

The constructivists and socio-culturalists share a belief that development occurs when children interact actively with their social and physical environment, and view children and adults as active participants in the learning process. Further, they recognize to varying degrees the importance of contextual factors (e.g., families' child-rearing practices, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds) in the study of children's development. Their views are very well aligned with the work developed by progressive educational theorists and practitioners interested in reforming the education of children, to which I turn next.

### **Exploration as a pedagogical tool**

Place exploration was used as a pedagogical tool to bridge the gap between the regular academic curriculum and children's everyday experiences. The progressive educators' approach to children's education "organized around authentic problems and projects that are frequently encountered in nonschool settings" was best summed up by John Dewey: "School should be less about preparation for life and more like life itself" (quoted in Brandsford et al., 2000, p. 77). Progressive educators such as Froebel (1887), Dewey (1956), and Mitchell (1991) postulated the importance of children's learning through exploration of their environment, and the centrality of the connection between schools and everyday settings (Brandsford et al., 2000; Resnick, 1987). In this tradition, focused primarily on reforming education systems, concepts like "adventure," "collaboration," "problem-solving," and "inquiry" are used to refer to children's

exploration of their physical and social environment in the context of the everyday life of schools, neighborhoods, and communities. Exploration is defined as a set of skills developed through the process of thinking, analyzing, and reflecting on one's own experiences in different settings. It provides children the opportunity to problematize, question, and unveil underlying structures of their understanding and experience of the environment. Children's desire to test themselves, use their physical abilities, and comprehend the outer world contributed to their "normal" growth and development. Froebel (1887) recognized the importance of exploration of their environment for school-entering age children, which, he believed, was conducive to greater learning and knowledge acquisition.

*It is not alone the desire to try and use his power that prompts the boy at this age to seek adventure high and low, far and wide, it is particularly the peculiarity and need of his unfolding innermost life, the desire to control the diversity of things, to see individual things in their connection with a whole, especially to bring near that which is remote, to comprehend (the outer world) in its extent, its diversity, its integrity; it is the desire to extend his scope step by step (Froebel, 1887, p. 103).*

Although it took years of trial and error in her teaching, Lucy Sprague Mitchell came to the conclusion that the learning of everyday geographic exploration was the tool for linking “informal pedagogy,” the “curriculum of experience,” and the often too remote and academic curriculum (Antler, 1987). Based on her ardent belief in the importance of children's geographical exploration outside their classrooms, the author of *Young Geographers* (Sprague Mitchell, 1991), a teacher at the Bank Street School, conducted field trips with her students, who roamed the docks, fish markets, ethnic neighborhoods, and construction sites in New York City as part of her instruction of

‘ecological literacy’ through exploration. “Ecological literacy is a deep understanding of the flora, fauna, water, culture, climate, and communities that children live in” (Sobel, 2005, p. 6). This pedagogical approach sees the child again as his or her own best resource when it came to learning about the world through subject areas, and believed strongly that learning is a long term and continuous task that thrives through many environments. “In this sense, then, the ultimate goal of schooling is to help students transfer what they have learned in school to everyday settings of home, community, and workplace” (Brandsford et al., 2000, p. 73).

The constructivist, socio-cultural, and progressive educational approaches have informed the work of geographers, environmental psychologists, and urban planners and designers studying the relationships between children’s experiences of places and their development in the context of everyday life (Aitken, 1994; Chawla, 2002; Gurlitz et al., 1998; Hallway & Valentine, 2000; Hart, 1979; Hart & Moore, 1971; Katz, 2004; Moore, 1990; Wood, 1984 & 1973; Young & Moore, 1978). These scholars *re-affirmed* the importance of place in the understanding of childhood. Their work is central to my approach to the study of children’s exploration of places in an urban setting.

## **Studies of Children’s Place Exploration**

Children's place exploration is part of their search for information and stimulation and is the outcome of a balance among the self, the stimuli coming from different kinds of places, and the world of rules and safety restrictions in their lives. “Children are constantly testing the boundaries of their geographic experience in search of stimulation, security and a sense of self and place” (Aitken, 1994, p. 1). Providing a social context to

children's place exploration, Hart (1979, 1986) developed and discussed "a schematic representation of the balance of safety and adventure in child development" which articulates the connections between children's exploration and the environment. He suggested that "exploration is [an] outward vector ... It expresses the urge found in all healthy children to move out from their home base to explore the environment, in order (it is hypothesized) to learn about it and about themselves" (Hart, 1978, p. 388). This approach to children's search for adventure indicates that exploration involves not only learning (knowledge and understanding) about oneself and the environment through ambulatory activity that starts from children's homes and moves outside of their homes in everyday life, but also understanding that children's further exploration of their environment require dealing with the issue of safety. "As social scientist and child professionals, our job for the future is to consider how to guarantee children accessibility to an environment without danger but which provides the unpredictability which is the basis of 'adventure.' This demands that we think of two sides of the issue: the degree of safety in the environment and the quality of the child's learning situation" (Hart, 1986, p. 5). These two issues are at the heart of my research questions, and are further explored in this dissertation.

In their valuable reviews of empirical studies on children's outdoor activities, Moore and Young (1978) and Chawla (1992) indicate that children spend much of their time outside of their own home. "Studies of place use demonstrate the importance of the street and immediate home environment in children's lives" (Chawla, 1992, p.81). Moreover, places like yards, parks, vacant lots, streets and sidewalks, swimming pools, playing fields, roller rinks, clubs, friends' homes, and commercial districts located outside

of the child's own home were perceived as important places used by children, and counted among their most favorite places in many studies (e.g., Gaster, 1993 & 1991; Moore, 1990). Although as Moore (1990) found, “[parks] were the most popular places to go after school and on weekends; the common outdoor places to meet friends; and, ... to be alone. Urban parks were a social hot spot. At the same time they were the most commonly prohibited by parents” (p. 242).

Children are driven to explore their social and physical environments, and these “have socialization functions” (Keller, 1998, p. 457). They are experimenting with and negotiating everyday spaces and people through a constant engagement (action) with their environment and creation of spatial discourses and understanding (Holloway & Valentine, 2000). Thus, the ways children interact with places matter in their lives and identity development through environmental, cultural and social competence (Bartlett et al., 1999; Hart, 1979; Keller, 1998; Lynch, 1973; Moore, 1990; Mead, 1984; Newson & Newson, 1968; Proshansky & Fabian, 1987; Tuan, 1977).

The interconnectedness of places is important in understanding children’s place exploration. The presence of children in urban outdoor environments and residential areas is connected to other environmental settings, and vice versa (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Harloff, Simone & Eybisch, 1998; Moore, 1990; Moore & Young, 1978). For example, institutional settings like schools provide at least some opportunities for children's place exploration during recess time, on school field trips, and after-school time (Baldassari, Lehman, & Wolfe, 1987; Bradley, 1991; Hart & Perez, 1980; WEY Initiating & Coordinating Group, 1972), and these settings are often ignored by researchers. Although including the school environment is somewhat unusual in place

exploration literature, there have been a few exceptions. The Project Washington Environmental Yard (WEY Initiating & Coordinating Group, 1972) demonstrated the importance of school environments as a field for children's environmental- and self-exploration (from kindergarten to grade 3). Children participating in the redevelopment of their schoolyard had opportunities to explore the school environment and its surroundings as they engaged in the project.

Previous research (Barker & Wright, 1955 & 1951; Buvik & Cold, 1995; Murphy, 1962 & 1956; Newson & Newson, 1976; Tars & Appleby, 1973) has looked at children's experiences through different environments, for example, home, residential and school areas, and various out-of-the-home environments, such as parks, streets, playgrounds, but *rarely connected these separate environments to form a holistic picture of children's activities*. In addition, the connections of children's experiences in major settings like home, and outside their home environments such as the school, streets, etc, but also the "found" places in their lives (Rivlin, 1986), or the "between" places such as hallways, alleys, backyards, etc., and their imagined places are relevant to children's place exploration. The meanings of these places to children surely bear upon their place explorations and experiences.

This dissertation addresses children's exploration of places in and around their houses, schools, neighborhoods, and city; and the urban issues (e.g., traffic density, fear of crime) confronting urban children and parents. It looks at urban children's experiences across environments in order to understand the differences in activities within and between settings. It is to the studies of children's place exploration in cities, and the proposition of an urban children's life space and territorial range model that I now turn.

## **Children's Place Exploration in Cities**

Cities afford diversity and complexity. They offer risk, danger, and adventure. In large urban centers like New York City, changes can be rapid, unpredictable, or continuous, and can offer social, cultural, economic, and political diversity, as well as other qualities such as different types of built forms, natural environments, anonymity, novelty and 'strangeness,' and danger. Urban environments have a "complex sensory dimension, geographical differentiation, setting selectability, ambience, public accessibility and changeability" (Proshansky, 1978, pp. 160-169). Holcomb (1977), for example, speculated that cities provide stimulation for children's development in similar ways as "nature." She suggested that most of the desirable qualities of the woods, such as changeability, seasonability, spaciousness, unpredictability, secrecy and mystery, manipulability (loose parts), irregularity, variety, and collectability, can be found in urban settings as well. She believed "that it is quite possible for the urban child of lower Manhattan, of Chicago's East Side, Boston's West End, or even the South Bronx, to grow into a fully functioning, happy human without exposure to primeval, or even to tamed nature" (Holcomb, 1977, p. 33). Thus, exposure to the urban environment can be a positive experience for children because it is a tremendous source of stimulation and exploration.

Researchers have argued that cities are complex and healthy environments for the physical, psychological and cognitive development of children, but that children's independent mobility and place exploration have become increasingly constrained in urban environments (Bartlett et al. 1999; Chawla, 2002; Gorlitz et al, 1998; Hart, 2002; Katz, 2004, 1998, 1994). This situation is part of what urban theorist Lewis Mumford

(1969) referred to as the “ambivalent gifts of city life” (p. 52): Rich and stimulating environments for exploration, at the same time as they are the most challenging environment to live in with children. Many urban children today are unable to meet their needs for independent and stimulating exploration of their local environment (Bartlett, 2002; Chawla, 2002; Hart, 2002). According to Chawla (2002), “... global census data show an irregular but general trend toward urbanization. In North America, Latin America and Europe, approximately 75 percent of the population already lives in urban areas. In Africa and Asia, this figure is about 37 percent, and rising” (pp. 15-16). Further, 53 percent of the world population is projected to live in cities by 2015 (Chawla, 2002; Malone, 2001). This increased urbanization around the world has not been matched with more investment in the infrastructure of cities and its people by most municipal governments. Therefore, the conjunction of increased urbanization and deep cuts in public spending has profound consequences on children’s use of the environment outside their homes. Most urban children’s physical environment needs (among others) are not being met with the gradual shrinking of the quality and number of outdoor spaces for children (Bartlett et al., 1999; Chawla, 2002; Hart, 2002; Katz, 2004). The lack of investment is especially true in the provision for children’s play and use of the urban environment. Children’s “... play [in the outdoor environment] is often trivialized and placed low on the funding agenda of cities” (Hart, 2002, p. 136). This continuous urbanization and the disengagement of public investment have raised a host of issues for children’s use of public spaces, including (1) design of cities and traffic flow issues, (2) crime and parental fears, and (3) increased commercialization of children’s play-space.

## **Design of cities and traffic flow**

The design of cities often presents challenges to children's independent mobility in their neighborhood. Many designs include little thought about young children's use of outdoor spaces when planning the layout of streets and dealing with automobile traffic. According to Harloff et al. (1998), "children face their greatest risk from traffic accidents between the age of six and seven years, for at that point they are neither cognitively nor motorically able to cope with the traffic situation yet are beginning to cover short distance alone, as indeed they must when they enter school" (p. 73). Depeau (2001) found that Parisian children, between the age of 9 and 19 years old, were concerned about road dangers as well as design issues such as car density, pedestrians' difficulties in crossing streets, and the narrow width of sidewalks because they had an impact on their access to public spaces. Parental concern about traffic has caused a decrease in children's mobility in their neighborhood, and increased surveillance of children's activities in the outdoor environment by adults (Aitken, 1994; Bjorklid, 1984 & 1982; Cunningham et al., 1996; Eubank-Ahrens, 1984; Harloff et al., 1998; Hart, 2002 & 1979; Hilman, 1997; Malone, 2001; Matthews, 1992; Wridt, 2004).

## **Crime and parental fears**

Crimes are a reality for many urban children and parents, but their perceptions are an exaggeration of reality, which has grave consequences on children's use of outdoor open spaces. Children are indeed victims of abduction, molestation, and murder. This problem is especially acute for those living in low-income neighborhoods (Garbarino,

Dubrow, Kostelny & Pardo, 1992; Hart, 2002). Children of low-income families often live in the most physically deteriorated and unsafe areas of the city; their parents, due to limited economic resources, have fewer means to provide them with access to alternative environments (see Cahill, 2000; Garbarino et al., 1992; Hart, 2002; Katz, 2004; Ladd, 1970; Rainwater, 1970; Williams & Kornblum, 1994 & 1985; Wridt, 2004). “Today, many children in New York City have no regular safe access to outdoor play places and there are critical inequities in the quality of provision” (Hart, 2002, p. 135). As a result, many parents living in neighborhoods with high levels of crimes attempt to keep their children indoors for safety reasons.

The perception and fear of crime, however, is much more of an issue than its actuality, and has great consequences for children’s use of public places (Blakely, 1993 & 1984; Katz, 2004, 1995 & 1991; Nevarez De Jesus, 1999; Wridt, 2004). Overall, most U.S. cities have seen a stabilization or gradual decrease in their relative high crime rates in the past 15 years (Bureau of Justice, 2005). For example, crime levels dropped 68% between 1993 and 2003 in New York City (New York City Police Department CompStat Unit, 2005). Despite this decline in crime, American parents continue to be concerned about their children’s safety in the outdoor environment (Wirthlin Worldwide, 2001). Parents perceive the outdoor environment as unsafe, and fear constantly for their children’s safety. Parental fear of the urban environment is fed and supported by a “mixture of real violence and the violence represented and/or reconstructed in the media and the individual imagination, where violence and images of violence are inextricably intertwined” (Amendola, 2005, p. 1). The news media play a big role in this process of putting parents in a constant state of alert. According to Parker and colleagues (2001),

the news media do not portray children in the best light. For example, the news media give children the least attention in all their news stories (10%), and when they do cover them, the focus is more on crime (45%) and less on issues relevant to children's development such as health (24%), lifestyle issues (19%), education (9%), and politics and economics (3%). Further, "Americans depend on the news media to inform them about the current conditions of children.... Local television news, in particular, plays a key role since the majority of adults get more of their news through local broadcasts than any other source" (Parker, Miller, Donegan & Gilliam, 2001, p. 2). This is also referred to as "ideology of fear" or "terror talk" because it scares parents, and as a consequence leads them to restrict children's socio-physical space and autonomous activity time through increased entrapment in their homes, among other things (e.g., involvement in organized activities, supervised outdoor play). Therefore, the degree of perceived neighborhood safety is a major determinant of how children use public spaces. Many of the traditional means by which children explored and learned about their environments are foreclosed in most cities. These are now substituted with organized sports, increased TV watching time and video games playing, and after-school programs (Bartlett et al., 1999; Garbarino et al., 1992; Gaster, 1991; Hart, 2000; Katz, 2004, 1998 & 1994; Wridt, 2004).

*In the United States and Britain, observers have noted that children are increasingly restricted in their access to spontaneous neighborhood play. Instead, they are kept inside watching television, or, for those who can afford it, taken to a variety of programmed activities such as organized sports and special lessons. These activities are valuable in their own way, but are not a substitute for the benefits of unstructured play with peers for young children's physical, social, intellectual and emotional development. Nor can they replace the growing sense of involvement that children gain from access to local neighborhood life (Bartlett et al., 1999, p. 123).*

### **Commercialization of children's play-space**

Another consequence of increased urbanization and public disinvestment in children's outdoor spaces is the commercialization of children's play-space. Although they are primarily used for play, children's commercialized spaces differ in their location, design layout, and services. They include commercial playgrounds, which are found in restaurants, airports, hospitals, service stations, etc. (McKendrick et al., 2000) and sport centers, which are often located in neighborhoods. For example, most of the commercialized sport centers located in Brooklyn are indoor spaces situated in areas with a mix of commercial and industrial establishments. They have sitting areas for adults to supervise their children, and are subdivided into several areas, including a cooking and eating area, a batting cage, a pitching area, a multiple purpose mini field used for soccer, basketball, and volley ball games, an arcade game area, air hockey and pool table area, and a large room for private events. They are designed for children 6 to 15 years old, who use them to play, practice batting or pitching, and attend birthday parties. An adult often accompanies them. These play environments are becoming a more integral part of children's geographic experience in cities, and are providing children with opportunities to play. However, "These new developments in many ways *reinforce* the trends towards restricting children's presence outdoors" (McKendrick et al., 2000, p. 101). Children are spending more time in indoor environments, including commercialized play-spaces and home settings (Hart, 2002; Katz, 2004 & 1998; McNeal, 1992; Valentine, Halloway & Bingham, 2000; Wridt, 2004).

## **Children's age and gender**

Children's age and gender play a role in how they perceive and explore urban environments; and are important dimensions in understanding children's access to, and use of the environments outside their home (see Blakely, 1993; Harloff et al., 1998; Katz, 1993; Matthews, 1992; Nevarez De Jesus, 1999; Saegert & Hart, 1978; Valentine, 1997a, 1997b & 1997c; Wridt, 2004 & 1999). As they grow and acquire more physical and mental abilities, for example, boys and girls expand their home range, and become competent and independent users of their local environment (Anderson & Tindall, 1972; Chawla, 1992; Hart, 1979; Moore & Young, 1978; Tindall, 1971; van Vliet, 1983). However, it is in their teens that that they "have the greatest chance to strike out, alone or with peers, to explore an ever-expanding repertoire of reachable places, in search of new experiences and adventure" (Moore, 1990, p. 11). Children's experiences of the environment are influenced by the perception of both age and gender appropriate activities in the social and cultural milieu in which they grow up, and by the perceived differential risks to boys and girls. For example, boys are observed outdoors more than girls after the age of 5 or 6 (see Moore & Young, 1978). "Girls are ... discouraged from activities usually considered masculine such as exploration and manipulation of the environment. ... Parents usually impose more restrictions on girls' use of public spaces than boys'" (Nevarez De Jesus, 1999, p. 48). Furthermore, boys are more active in negotiating their geographic explorations with parents than girls (Wridt, 2004). Researchers have also found, not coincidentally, that girls and boys have different environmental abilities and knowledge. For example, girls have more intimate knowledge of local places, while boys travel further away from their home than do girls

and therefore have more extensive but perhaps less detailed knowledge (Chawla, 1992; Hart, 1979; Saegert & Hart, 1978; Self, Gopal, Golledge, & Fenstermaker, 1991).

### **Children's environmental preferences and interests**

Environmental preferences and interests are key variables in children's perception and exploration of the environment. Newson and Newson (1976), in their study of seven-year-old children, tried to find out "to what extent the children themselves preferred to be out of the house" (p. 70). They assumed that children's preference for the environments outside their home was based partly on their temperament. To examine this, they asked each child's mother whether she would call her child "an indoor child or an outdoor child" (p. 70). The researchers found that "seventy-five per cent of [the] children were, in fact, placed unambiguously in one category or the other, the other 25% being regarded as 'a bit of both' or 'either way, depending on what the weather's like'" (p. 70). However, Newson and Newson (1976) did not ask the children themselves about their preferences for indoor and outdoor environments. Children's temperament, from parents' perspective alone, is insufficient to explain their environmental preferences. Furthermore, children's environmental preferences and interests are also influenced by their cultural backgrounds. Differences have been found in the ways children from different nationalities use the environment outside the home (Harloff et al., 1998).

## Location of children's home

Place of residence is another important factor in children's independent use of the environment outside their homes (Harloff et al., 1998; van Staden, 1984; Wridt, 2004). In their work on children's perception of their urban environment, Donaldson and Aldrich (1970) talked about children's degree of happiness at home and the physical environment as major factors affecting children's exploration in urban settings. They formulated the view that the more happiness children have access to at home the more likely they explore places in the city. They believed that there is a strong relationship among issues of happiness in the home, permanency of a home base, territorial range and age, and different stages of the home base in the process of the child's place exploration.

*As has probably been true of all of the world's famous explorers, in order for the child to explore with zest, the permanency of a home base must be certainty. ... As the spatial range of the child expands so does the "home base." When a child expands his realm to include his neighborhood, his home base becomes his home. ... The developmental sequence is such that the territorial range at one level of experience becomes the home base for the next stage in exploration (Donaldson & Aldrich, 1970, pp. 279-285)*

Moreover, the specific characteristic of the physical and social environment around the location of children's homes like types of buildings (low-rise versus high-rise houses), access to play areas in or in the immediate vicinity of the residence (i.e., backyard, semi-private space outdoors, playground), traffic density on streets adjacent to their home location, and access to a social network (i.e., neighbors, friends) all have profound consequences for children's place exploration in their urban neighborhood, and

are better understood in the context of what I refer to as the “life space and territorial range model” based on the work of Harloff and colleagues (1998), and Moore (1990).

### **Urban Children’s Life Space and Territorial Range Model**

More than two centuries of theories and studies have not only offered insights about the complexity of the relationship between children’s exploration and development, but also revealed the limited research available on the topic of children’s exploration and cities. As Hart (1998) noted in his keynote address at a conference about children, cities, and psychological theories, “Empirical research and theory on the ecology of children in cities is in an impoverished state” (p. 1). He called for “a new interdisciplinary wave of integrated and socially relevant theory and research on children’s lives in cities” (p. 2). Building on the recognition that children can have rich experiences in cities, which is especially illustrated in the works of Ward (1978), Holcomb (1977), Proshansky (1978), and Moore (1990), a growing body of work about the issues related to urban children’s everyday geographies and development has emerged in the last ten years (see Bartlett et al., 1999; Chawla, 2002; Halloway & Valentine, 2000; Harloff et al., 1998; Hart, 2002 & 2000; Katz, 2004; Nevarez De Jesus, 1999; Wridt, 2004). From a synthesis of this body of research, the following conclusions can be made. These often taken-for-granted points are critical to this research study:

- Individual, cultural, social, economic, environmental, and historical factors are key to understanding children’s development and exploration of places.
- Individual, biological, and environmental factors are critical in the development of children’s thinking and physical abilities.

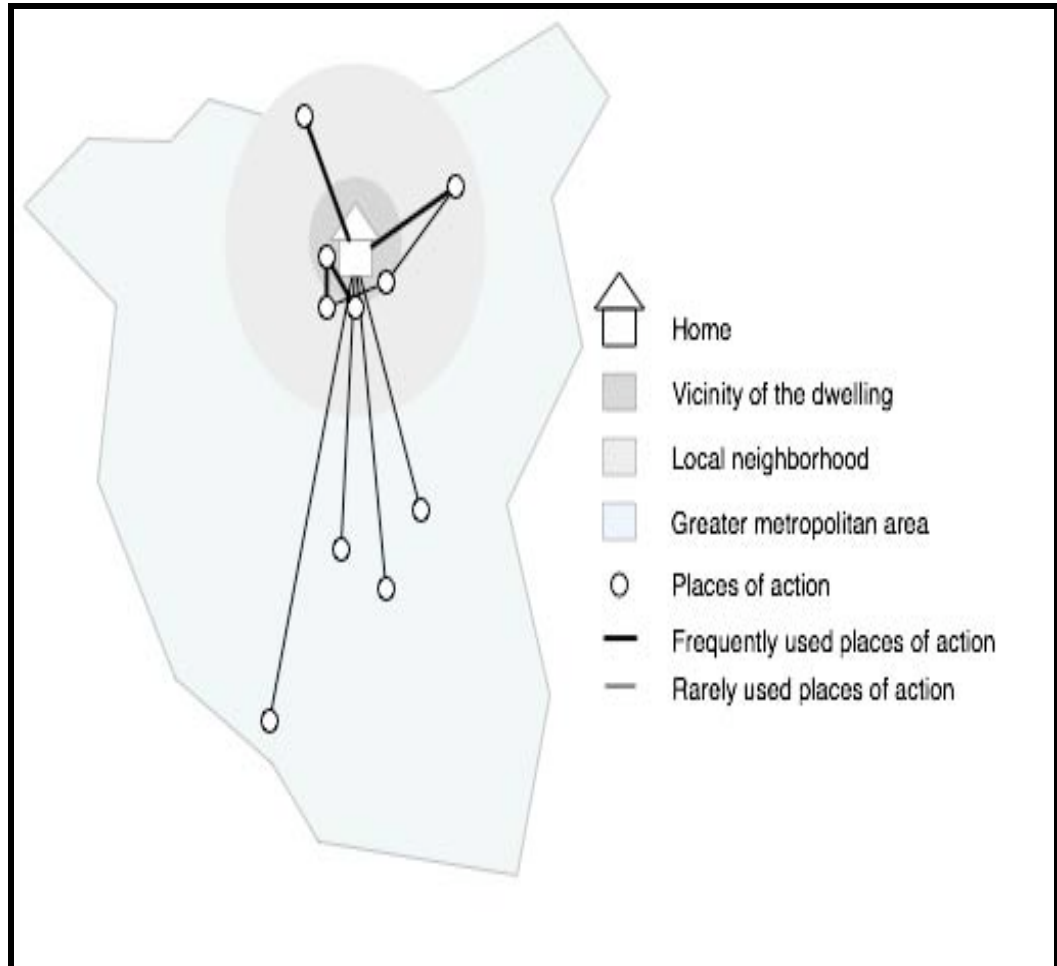
- Children are not passive but active agents in their development. Children are individual human beings, as well as competent users and capable assessors of the environment. Furthermore, they are better able to provide views and opinions about their own experiences of the environment than their parents and/or caregivers could provide.
- Exploration is a multi-dimensional concept acting as a tool used to (1) reduce or eliminate tensions generated by the need to survive, (2) satisfy one's curiosity about stimuli present in the external environment, and (3) engage actively with the external environment. Furthermore, it allows children to make sense of the physical and social environment, and thus, is critical in understanding children's learning and development.
- Children's place exploration occurs in a multitude of settings (e.g., home, friend's home, school, park, commercial establishments).
- Cities are complex social and environmental settings, which provide both rich and stimulating exploration opportunities, as well as challenges to children and parents.

The multiple dimensions of children's development and experiences of the physical environment have been integrated into different ecological models, which conceptualize and visualize children's transactions with their local-global socio-cultural and physical environment (see Harloff et al., 1998; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1990; Moore & Young, 1978; Wachs, 1987; Wridt, 2004). One of the models, the life space and territorial model, developed by Harloff and colleagues in their study of the life worlds of

children in the city (see Figure 2), is of central relevance to my conceptualization of children's place exploration. It combines conceptions of children's "territorial range," "action spaces," and "networks of child-environment units" to describe the urban geography of children in terms of the types of places they explore and their activities in these places (Harloff et al., 1998; Moore, 1990; Moore & Young, 1978). The concepts of territorial range, action spaces, and networks refer to places and their connecting pathways, and are composed of three distinct levels: "habitual range" (places in the immediate vicinity of the child's home); "frequented range" (places within the local neighborhood used with some physical restrictions (traffic, parental rules, etc.); and "occasional range" (places located in greater metropolitan area) (see Figure 2).

These interconnecting and overlapping levels are influenced by the child's individual characteristics (age, gender, personality, nationality), and other factors such as home location, resources available in the immediate vicinity of the child's home and neighborhood, time (e.g., weekends and holidays, summer, after regular school-hours), the degree of accessibility of places in the larger metropolitan area, and the socio-economic status and culture of the family. The life space and territorial range model is a useful approach to understanding urban children's exploration of places around their home, in their neighborhood, and in the city as a whole. I use it as a basis to understand and frame how the ecological contradictions (cities as rich places for children's learning and exploration versus cities as closed-off places to children) presented to children and parents in the urban landscape are played out in children's place exploration, and to assess the factors influencing these experiences in their everyday lives.

Figure 2: Life space and territorial range model of children's place exploration



Source: Harloff, H., Simone, J.L., & Eybisch, C. (1998). Children's life worlds in urban environments. In D. H. Gurlitz, J. H. Harloff, G. Mey, & J. Valsiner (Eds.), *Children, Cities, and Psychological Theories* (pp. 55-84). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

### CHAPTER THREE RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

I conducted the data collection for this study in New York City 10 years ago. This begs the obvious question of the relevance of my data in the context of today's (2006) contemporary childhood in New York City, and the research findings about children's place exploration in the growing field of urban childhood. I believe that the issues my study raised in the mid-1990s are still relevant based on the conclusions drawn by recent studies about children's experience of the urban environment (see, Chawla, 2002; Gorlitz et al., 1998; Hart, 2002; Katz, 2004; Nevarez De Jesus, 1999; Wridt, 2004) and my own observations as a parent and resident of New York City. In the mid-1990s, my research questions revolved around the investigation of the everyday geographies of 10-year-old children in Park Slope and New York City, and the environmental, socio-cultural, and economic factors affecting their experiences. It focused specifically on places where children go, the people with whom they go to various places, how they get there, what they like and know about these places, and what are the key issues that affect their use of places in their neighborhood and city. It documented the meanings that children and parents attributed to place exploration in their neighborhood and city. These questions continue to be grounded in my argument, which I discussed in detail in the two previous chapters, that children are being increasingly restricted in their exploration of the larger urban environment, which is due to many factors including parental perceptions of the environment and increasing public disinvestment in children's play environments in cities. For example, researchers continue to find that although the percentage of crime trends in New York City is on the decline, parental fears of crime

remain a key factor in the degree to which urban children are allowed to explore places in and outside their neighborhoods (see Cahill, 2000; Nevarez De Jesus, 1999; Wridt, 2004).

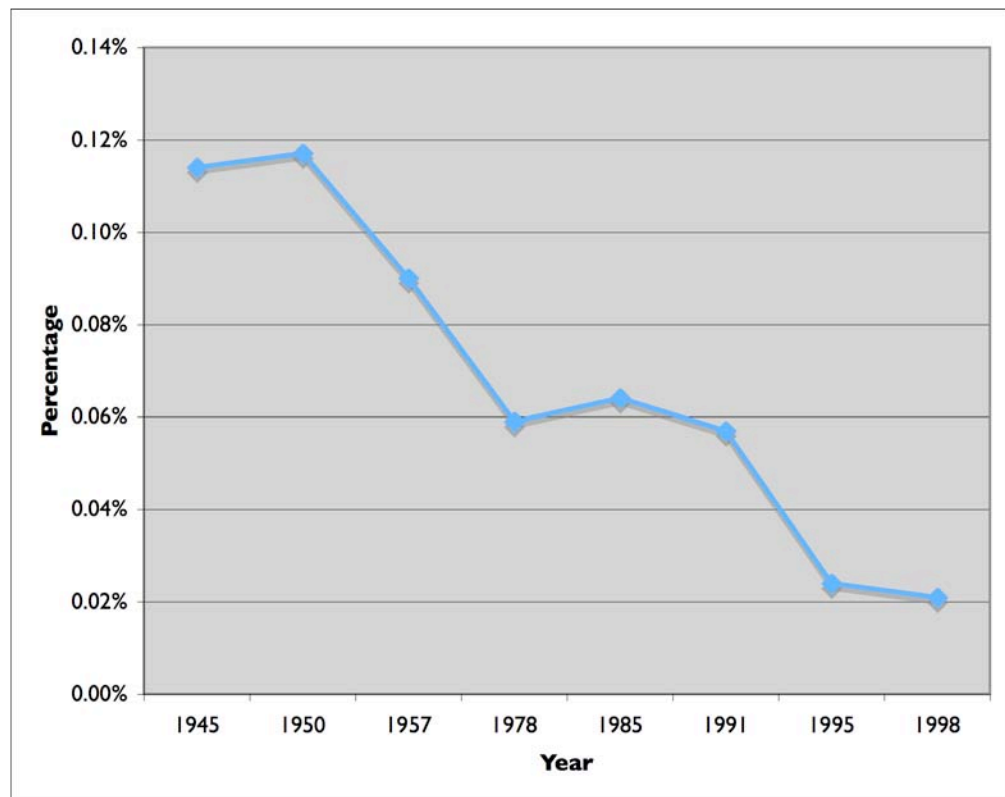
An independent assessment of New York City's neighborhood parks conducted in 2005 by New Yorkers For Parks, a non-for-profit organization that conducts quantitative studies about the varying qualities of neighborhood parks throughout the five boroughs (which does not include the "flagship" parks like Prospect Park) and advocates for quality neighborhood parks, concluded that New York City parks are often significantly impacted by inconsistent maintenance work; and the larger and high-profile parks like Central Park that are able to access private funding fare far better than the neighborhood parks reliant solely on public dollars. They argue that there are simply not enough public resources to maintain all neighborhood parks at the same basic service level and not enough private money to make up the difference (New Yorkers for Parks, 2005; see also, New Yorkers for Parks, 2002, The Parks Council, 2000). Table 2 shows the percentage decrease of the budget of the Park and Recreation Department in New York City over the last 16 years (see also Figure 3). "The New York City park system is one of the largest in the country. Unfortunately, New York is also a leader in under-funding its parks. When it comes to spending per acre, New York City ranks 20<sup>th</sup> out of 25 cities nationwide" (New Yorkers for Parks, 2005, p. 1). Furthermore, Brooklyn has the largest population in the city and 34% of the children of the city aged under 18, and the lowest percentage of land devoted to parks of the five boroughs. It has 1.1 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents (New Yorkers for Parks, 2005).

Table 2: New York City Park and Recreation Resources

Year	Management & Administration Staff	Maintenance & Operation Staff	Recreation Service Staff	Total Department of Park & Recreation Staff
1990	280	3637	371	4657
2006	90	1422	126	1966
Percent Decrease	68%	61%	66%	58%

Source: New Yorkers For Parks (2006).

Figure 3: Recreation Funds in New York City between 1945 and 1998



Source: Hart, R. (2000). The changing recreational landscape of young people: A vision. In The Parks Council (Ed.), *Play, Recreation & Sports: A Celebration*. New York City: The Parks Council.

Today there is a common agreement among researchers of the local nature of urban children's place exploration. "The spaces of consequences in children's everyday lives tend to be extraordinarily local. In contemporary U.S. cities, for instance, children under twelve spend almost all of their time within a few kilometers of where they live: in the homes of family members or friends, in schools, and in the open spaces of their neighborhoods" (Katz, 2004, p. 163). These are conditions I witnessed every day as a resident of New York City and a parent of a ten year old. My son is the focus of the last chapter in this dissertation, which looks at the exploration strategies of contemporary urban childhood in comparison to the experiences of the children in my study.

## **The Research Design**

This general context explains my choice of an ecological approach, which "attends to the interplay between individual characteristics of the child and the social and physical environment in influencing the child's developmental processes over a period of time" (Bronfenbrenner, 2001, p. 640). It takes into account the everyday life situations of children and their families, children's exploration of the urban environment, and children's and parents' views of place exploration; and the larger socio-economic and cultural contexts and physical environments influencing participants' experiences and views about children's place exploration (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 & 1986; Moen et al., 2001). Specifically, my study adopts a qualitative research design that incorporates multiple research methodologies.

Interviews with parents and children provide most of the data for this research along with mapping activities conducted during several interview sessions.<sup>2</sup> I asked each participant to keep a log of places they remembered between interview sessions. Furthermore, I reviewed (1) reports from the City of New York Planning Department about the profile of the study neighborhood and participating schools in terms of the demographics of their 10-year-old student populations, and (2) police crime statistics from the New York City Police Department. In addition, I conducted informal observations of children's homes during the different interview sessions with children and parents, and in the areas of the neighborhood they lived in to get a sense of the resources available to them in and around their homes. All data collected through these methods between 1995 and 1996 were included in my analyses of urban children's place experiences. In this chapter I describe the data collection procedures, the instruments used, the data analysis process, and the limitations of the study.

## **Selecting the Neighborhood**

New York City is made up of many distinct neighborhoods. It is always a challenge to define the exact boundaries of any neighborhood in a large city like New York or even be clear about their names. Even residents' perceptions of their neighborhood boundaries vary (see Chapter One for a definition of neighborhood). Neighborhood boundaries and names vary depending on the source of the information. Some neighborhoods have distinct features and histories while others are in a state of

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<sup>2</sup> The names of all individuals have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants in the study.

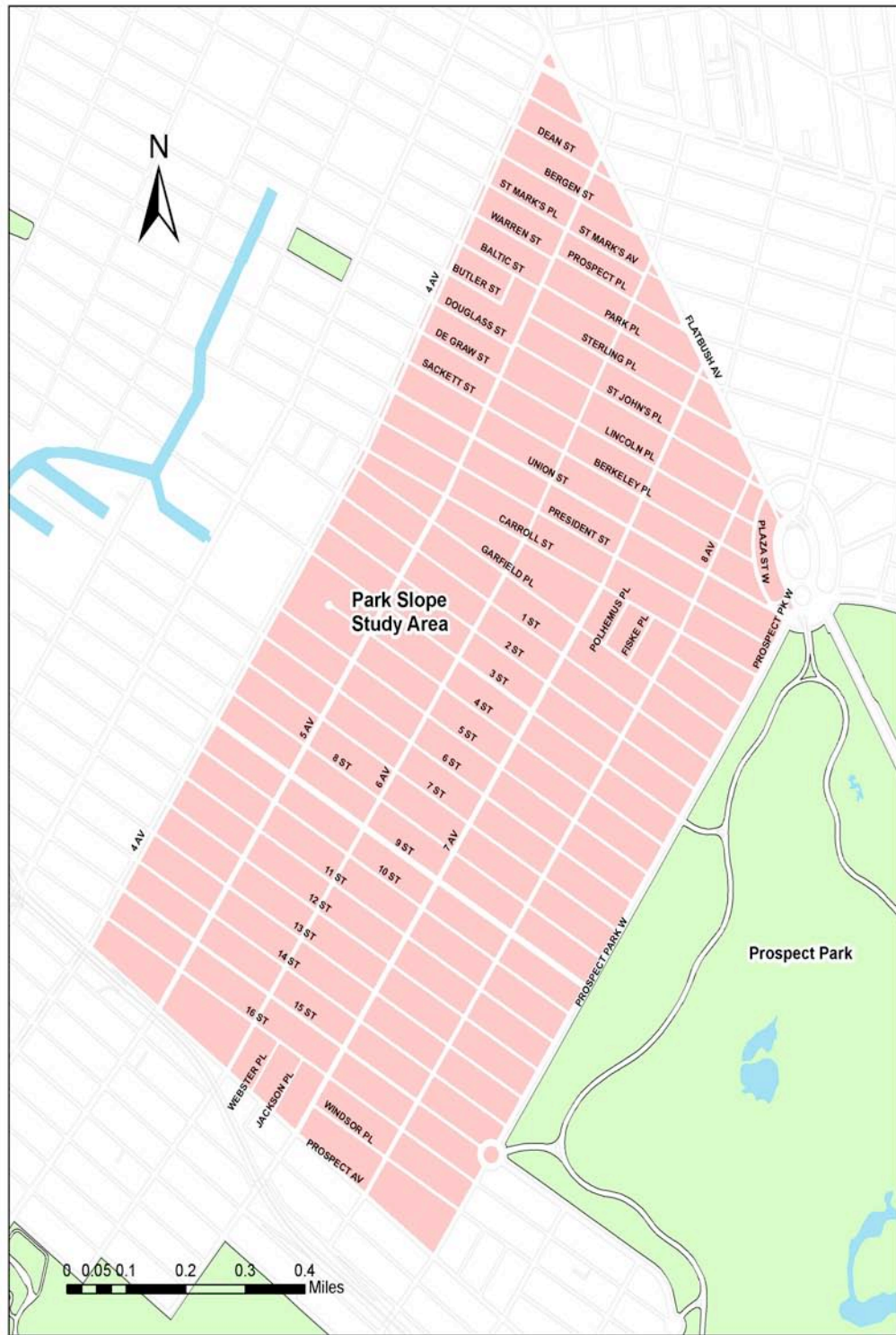
metamorphosis because of shifts such as gentrification and real estate speculation or decline. Many neighborhoods have both distinct histories and intense experiences of change. This is true of Park Slope. Therefore, the geographic boundaries of the neighborhood where I conducted the study are approximate and the names of neighborhoods where I worked were those that were commonly used or would be known by a typical local resident.

To address urban children's exploration of places in New York City and the issues that it raised for parents and children in the mid-1990s, I conducted my study in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn. As stated previously, Park Slope was socio-culturally and economically diverse. It had many educational resources for children and their families, a convenient public transportation system, declining crimes rates, and increased traffic density (see Chapter 1 for more details). The specific area of study, which was about 2.2 square miles, was bounded by Fourth Avenue to the west, Prospect Park West (Ninth Avenue) to the east, Flatbush Avenue to the north, and Fifteenth Street to the south (see Figure 4).

I chose to work in this neighborhood for many reasons:

- The neighborhood had seven public schools from which I could draw a sample from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade population.
- The neighborhood is located next to Prospect Park, a large outdoor space which affords children a variety of opportunities for exploring, and can be considered the 'backyard' of Park Slope.

Figure 4: Study Area



- Park Slope was a very culturally, ethnically and economically mixed area with a large population of young families when this study was conducted (1995-1996), despite ongoing gentrification, which began in the 1970s.
- Park Slope was perceived to be a safe neighborhood by most of its inhabitants, and by city officials during the time of my study. For example, there was a 41% drop in crimes (e.g., murder, robbery, assault, burglary, and grand larceny) between 1993 and 1997 in the area served by the 78<sup>th</sup> Precinct, which includes Park Slope. A similar decline in the overall percentage of crime in New York City (41%) was also observed during 1993 and 1997 (New York Police Department CompStat Unit, 2005). Although they are the best data available, these statistics have limitations. For example, it is hard to know precisely how these statistics affect parents' perceptions of the urban environment and children's place exploration since the data are not available by victims' ages, or by neighborhood. Further, certain types of crime are reported and not others, and the numbers reported are low. It is critical to understand that most people get their information about crimes from/via the media – so the media reporting on these issues would be very important as well (usually more important than actual crime statistics).
- Finally, I was a resident of Park Slope for five years. As a parent, I knew the neighborhood very well and used most of its public resources (e.g., the park, playgrounds, libraries, shops, schools, restaurants, museum, zoo). As a parent involved in my child's day care center in the neighborhood, I had a chance to meet and know a lot of the parents and children there, and befriended several

educators (e.g., teachers, principals) who also lived in the neighborhood. Later this familiarity with the neighborhood became critical in the selection of study participants. However, I contacted individual schools only after my dissertation proposal and instruments were reviewed and approved by the Proposal Review Committee of the Board of Education as part of the requirements for conducting research in the New York City Public Schools.

## **Selecting the Participants**

To participate in this study, a child had to be (1) a 10-year-old, (2) a resident of Park Slope, and (3) attending one of the public schools in the neighborhood. Another criterion, gender, which plays a role on how children experience the environment, was used so I could have an equal number of boys and girls in the study.

### **Age**

Children in middle childhood (7 to 10 years old) are becoming more independent of their attachment figures as they engage with more diverse social and physical environments. They have complex verbal abilities and social relations, and thus are able to articulate their geographic thoughts and experiences without adult intervention.

## **Gender**

Gender has also been found to be a significant factor related to children's feelings toward, understandings of, and access to places (Hart, 1978; Katz, 1993; Moore & Young, 1978; Saegert & Hart, 1978; van Vliet, 1983). The study was designed to include an equal number of boys and girls.

### **Being a resident of Park Slope and attending public school in the neighborhood**

Because I wanted to compare children's experiences in a common geographic area and attending the same type of school, the children had to reside within the boundaries of the Park Slope neighborhood outlined above, and go to school in one of the public schools in the neighborhood. I thought these two criteria would provide me with the opportunity to compare the urban experiences of children from the same neighborhood and type of school.

I worked with two public schools, P.S. 321 and P.S. 10 in the area I delimited as Park Slope (see Figure 6). At the time of this study, the school principal of P.S. 321, who was my neighbor, was very interested in my research topic, and was willing to help me recruit participants from his school. The school, which is on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Streets at the center of Park Slope, served 567 students (grade PK through 5). Most of the students lived in Park Slope, and the rest came from the surrounding neighborhoods: Prospect Heights, Fort Greene, Cobble Hill, and Windsor Terrace. The school had four 5<sup>th</sup> grade classes serving 116 students.

The school principal of P.S. 321 gave me access to two 5<sup>th</sup> grade classes (59 students). These two classes had an ethnically and economically mixed population of 10-year-old children. He introduced me to the two classes, and then asked me to talk to them about the purpose of the study and answer teachers' and/or students' questions or concerns about the study. At the end of this introductory phase to students and teachers, I gave each student a letter of invitation to participate in the study for their parents to read and sign (see Appendix).

In total, 23 out of 59 families with children from P.S. 321 indicated they were interested in participating in the study. I followed up with a telephone call to the 23 families to set up interview dates. At the end of this process, I had 15 families from P.S. 321, who were definitely interested in participating in the study, and agreed to set up dates for the interview sessions. From these 15 families, 10 boys and 5 girls participated in my study. The remaining 8 families did not participate because (1) their child was not interested, (2) the families lived outside of Park Slope, or (3) the children were not 10 years old.

To balance the sample group and complete my data collection, I still needed 5 more girls. I got access to P.S. 10 through my Park Slope parents' and friends' network. P.S. 10, an elementary grade school, is located on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 18<sup>th</sup> Street on the south side of Park Slope. A much smaller school, P.S. 10 served 150 students (grade 1 through 5). Most of the students lived in Sunset Park, a neighborhood located to the southwest side of Park Slope (see Figure 5), and the rest came from Park Slope. It had one fifth-grade class serving 26 students.

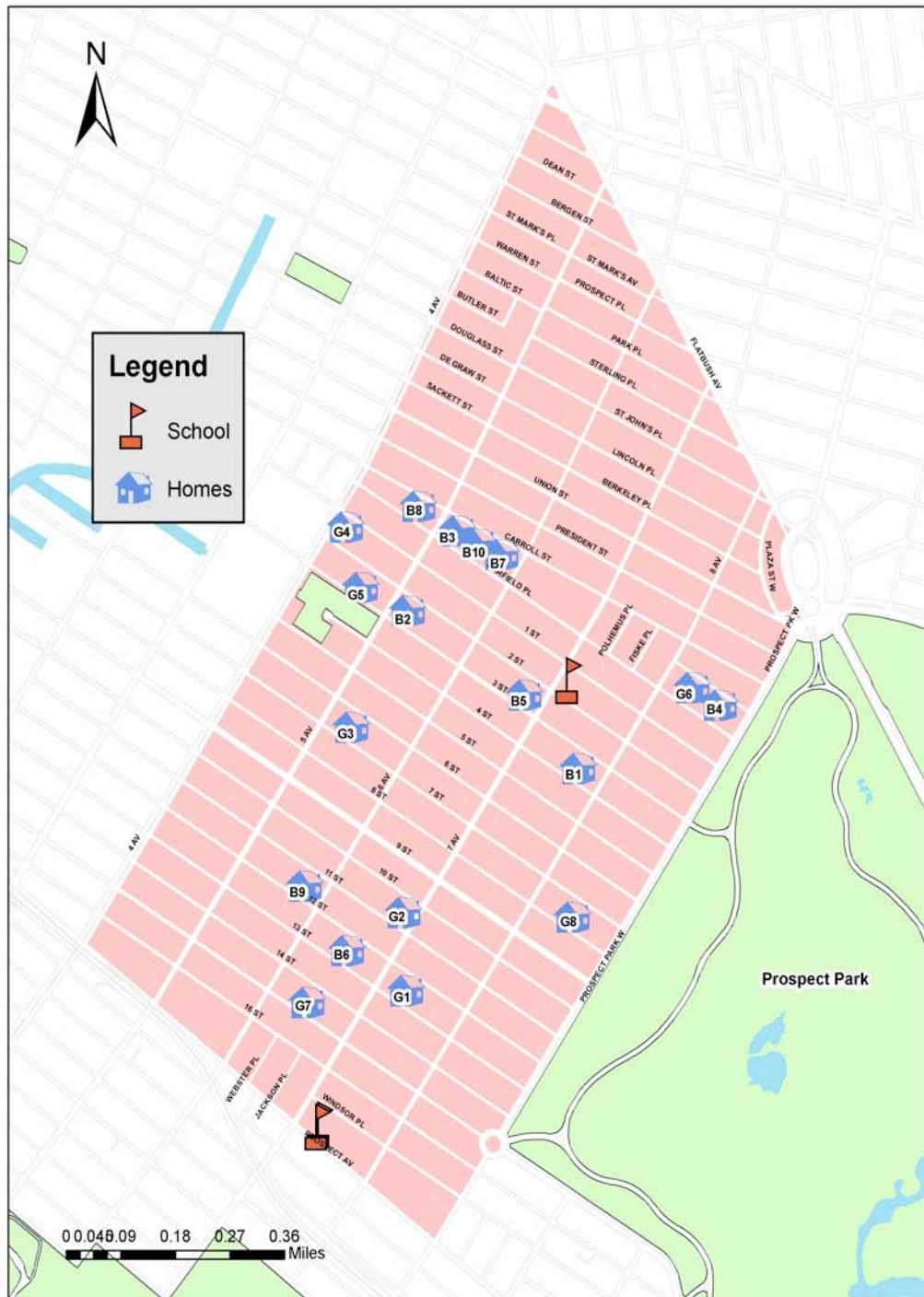
The school principal allowed me to distribute the letters of invitation to the fifth-grade class at her school. I only gave the letter of invitation to girls in the fifth grade class. Five families were interested in participating in the study. With two out of the five families declining to participate in the study because of lack of time and interest, I ended up with three families from P.S. 10.

Finally, a total of 36 respondents, 21 female and 15 male, participated in the present study: eighteen 10-year-old children, 8 girls and 10 boys, from both schools; and eighteen parents, 13 females and 5 males. I only interviewed one parent in each family. More female than male parents participated in the study (see Table 3).

Table 3: Participants in Study

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
Children (n=18)	8	10
Parents (n=18)	13	5
Total (N=36)	21	15

Figure 5: Children's Homes and Schools



## Profiles of Participating Families

The families participating in this study reflected some of the racial/ethnic and economic diversity of the neighborhood. They had different racial/ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, different educational backgrounds and occupations, varying numbers of family members and household organization, and different residential and home statuses (e.g., owners, renters, immigrants, natives, number of years as a resident of Park Slope) (see Table 4). Despite this diversity, most of the children came from families with the following main characteristics:

- Caucasian families with parents who were natives of the United States and had had suburban childhoods. Thirteen families were white, two were Latino, two were ethnically mixed, and one family was African-American. There were twelve families with both parents from the United States, three families with both parents from another country, and three families with one parent from another country and one parent from the United States. Among the parents not from the continental United States, three grew up in Puerto Rico, two in the Dominican Republic, two in the former Yugoslavia, one in Taiwan, and one in England. Most of the children's parents grew up in the suburbs. Referring here to both parents, I found that there were eighteen who grew up in the suburbs, twelve in urban settings, and six in rural areas. Six of the twelve urban parents were born and raised in New York City.
- Two-parent-households and an average of two children. Fifteen of the families lived in two-parent-households; while the other three families were divorced and

the parents shared custody. While there was an average of 1.6 children per household, two children had no siblings and one child had ten brothers and sisters.

- Long time residents of Park Slope. Adults in the sample households lived an average of 14 years in the neighborhood, with a range of 3 to 35 years.
- Homeowners. Fourteen families owned their place of residence, while four were renting their apartments. They lived in different types of housing: apartment house (7), brownstone (7), townhouse (3), and single detached house (1).
- Proximity of homes to Prospect Park. Most of the participating families' dwellings were located around the center of the neighborhood, an average of 2.25 blocks away from the park (see Figure 4).
- Middle class families. Ten families were middle class, five were upper middle class, and three were working class. I determined family socio-economic background using the following variables: parents' education levels and occupations; whether they owned or rented their residence; and the distance of their residence to Prospect Park. Within the participating families (36 parents), eighteen parents had Masters degrees, eight had Bachelor degrees, four had some college education, four had high school level education, and two had an elementary school level of education. As stated earlier, most families owned their homes, and most homes were located fairly close to Prospect Park. Three of the parents were homemakers, while the rest of them (n=33) held the following occupations at the time of the study:
  - Private film, publishing, market research, and business consultant (12)

- Teacher (5)
- Salesperson (3)
- Homemaker (3)
- Computer designer and programmer (3)
- Architect (2)
- Lawyer (2)
- Accountant (1)
- Journalist (1)
- Bus driver (1)
- Museum exhibit designer (1)
- Locksmith (1)
- School principal (1)

Table 4: Families' Profiles

Class (N=18)	Ethnicity/race (N=18)				Home Status (N=18)		Distance between home and Prospect Park (N=18)	
	Latino	White	Afro- American	Mixed- couple	Rent	Own	>=3 block	<3 block
Working class (n=3)	2	1			2	1	2	1
Middle class (n=10)		7	1	2	2	8	6	4
Upper middle class (n=5)		5				5		5
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>

## Profiles of Participating Children

The similarities and differences of the above family profiles were reflected in the group of children who participated in this study in different ways. Most of the children were white middle class, lived in apartment types of housing, and grew up in Park Slope. In addition, they had access to open spaces in and around their homes, lived in proximity to Prospect Park, were allowed to walk to school alone, were not allowed to hang around places (e.g., streets, store fronts) around the neighborhood; engaged in organized activities after-school, were characterized as being more indoor kids than outdoor kids by their parents, and had access to a diverse social network (neighbors, relatives, and a lot of friends) (see Table 5).

Table 5: Children's Profiles

Characteristics		Girls (n=8)	Boys (n=10)	Total (N=18)
Class	Working class	2	1	3
	Middle class	3	7	10
	Upper middle class	3	2	5
Ethnicity/race	White	5	8	13
	Latino	2		2
	Afro-American	1		1
	Bi-racial		2	2
Number of Siblings	Older siblings	4	4	8
	Younger siblings	2	3	5
	Both	2	1	3
	None	0	2	2
Type of residence	Apartment	5	8	13
	House	3	2	5
Access to open spaces in and near home	Park, playground	3	2	5
	Backyard	2	5	7
	Both	3	3	6
Distance between home and Prospect Park	0-3 blocks	5	5	10
	3-5 blocks	3	5	8
Walk to and from school	Allowed	3	8	11
	Not allowed	5	2	7
Indoor/outdoor preferences (as indicated by parents)	Indoor	5	2	7
	Outdoor	1	4	5
	Both	2	4	6

## Research Instruments

To answer my research questions, I used interview protocols and neighborhood maps with children and parents, which are described below (a copy of each instrument protocol is in the Appendix). During the children's and parents' interview sessions, I used a map of the neighborhood to collect and chart data about the specific places that the children knew about and experienced in the neighborhood. The interview sessions were all held in the families' homes. I provided a notebook to each child in which to record additional places that they remembered between interview sessions. I also conducted informal observations of each child's home setting and immediate outdoor environments.<sup>3</sup>

### Parent interview

The parent's interview protocol (see Appendix) included questions about (1) the different kinds of local places in New York City that parents knew their children knew about and/or went to with and without them (the parent); (2) parents' concerns, feelings and thoughts about raising their children in a large urban setting like New York City; and

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<sup>3</sup> Most of the research on children's exploratory behaviors and environmental experiences has employed *systematic* observation as the method of data collection. I did not include this method for several reasons. This research focused on children's everyday geographies across environments (e.g., inside or outside the home, streets, park, etc). In order to observe the children adequately, I would have to track them across environments for an extended period of time. In New York City, where children's safety is a big issue for parents and children, it would have been extremely difficult for me to get permission from parents to spend a lot of time with their children in their absence (see Blakely, 1993). Moreover, being a black male and a foreigner might not facilitate my access to children. Therefore, I did not have the opportunity to pre-select or design the environments in which the children would be observed (as my predecessors did). While observations can provide discussion-provoking information, they could not function as a primary source of data. On the other hand, the children's and parents' interviews and maps and my informal observations did allow me to get a sense of urban children's geographical exploration, which might not come through as well in the course of systematic observations.

(3) family background. This interview protocol was supplemented with a landmark map of Park Slope on which parents were able to point out places that their children knew of and had experienced in the neighborhood with and without their parents (see Appendix). The parent interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes.

### **Child interview**

The child's interview protocol (see Appendix) included questions about (1) places that children visited in the city and their neighborhood, (2) whether they went to these places alone or with others, (3) the ways they got to these places (e.g., on foot, by car or public transportation), (4) their activities in these places, and (5) their feelings about and knowledge of these places. During the interview sessions, I used a landmark map of the neighborhood on which children were able to point out places that they knew of and had experienced in the nearby environment (see Appendix). I familiarized the child with the map, and used their home as the geographic center. The students' interviews took two sessions of about 45 minutes each to complete. In a few cases, I came back for a third session.

In addition, the children were given their own geographic notebook called "My Atlas of New York City" to record the names of the places they remembered experiencing in the city but didn't think of or couldn't remember during the interview sessions. They showed me these notebooks on my second and third visits, and if they recorded any new information about places that they experienced, I would ask them about them. However, most of the children did not use the notebooks, and preferred to tell me directly the places they remembered. I had assumed that these children would like to

write down their ideas about places they knew and experienced in the neighborhood. The low response rate, however, suggested that either I was wrong or the children may have perceived it as another task (or homework) in their busy lives or that the initial interviews covered all the places remembered.

### **Neighborhood maps**

A landmark paper map of Park Slope (see Appendix) was used to help participants visualize the places children experienced in the neighborhood. I used it during both the child's and parent's interview sessions. First, participants were familiarized with the maps by asking them to identify their home and school as well as other familiar landmarks such as Prospect Park, Brooklyn Public Library, or Brooklyn Museum. Then, I asked each participant to point out all the places he or she had been to in the neighborhood. I gave each participant colored stickers to use as markers. Red stickers were used to set the child's neighborhood boundaries by identifying the farthest places that he or she went in the neighborhood. Yellow stickers were used to indicate places the child went alone. Green stickers were used for the places the child went to with others (e.g., friends, adults) in the neighborhood. Participants who were familiar with the map put the appropriate colored stickers on the map by themselves. However, for those who were less familiar with the neighborhood map, I had to help them affix the appropriate stickers. In either situation, the map with the interview instruments allowed participants and me to agree on each child's neighborhood places with specifically identifiable boundaries.

### **Informal observations.**

I conducted an informal observation of each child's home setting and immediate outdoor environments. I looked for the types of resources available for the child in and immediately around their homes (e.g., backyard, basketball hoop, furniture, games), and in the vicinity of the house (e.g., stoops, number of children on street, traffic density on street, open spaces). I recorded these data in a notebook.

### **Data Collection**

All parent and child interview sessions were conducted in the evenings and weekends at the child's home, between 1995 and 1996. Although there was always at least one of the parents in the house during the child's interview sessions, the interviews were conducted separately with no interference either from parents during the child's interview sessions or from the participating child and other family members during the parent interview session. Parents did not see their child's map of the neighborhood and vice versa.

Interested families were told the purpose of the study and asked to sign a consent form prior to their participation. Fourteen out of the eighteen participating parents were female. One parent was interviewed in each family. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour. In each family, the parent was interviewed first, and separately from the child. This initial encounter with the family gave me the opportunity to be known by the parents and get an early sense of the child's experiences of Park Slope and New York City. At the end of the interview sessions, each participating child was given a book

entitled “Coloring Map Book: Countries and Flags” (Gramfors, 1992) as a token of appreciation for their participation.

To ascertain the demographics of the Park Slope area, I used census data as well as park resources and park use data available in reports from the City of New York Planning, Police, and Parks and Recreation Departments (see references in Bibliography). These reports have data on household income, race and ethnicity, total population by age, crime statistics, as well as information on recreational and educational resources in the neighborhood and city.

## **Data Analysis**

I analyzed the responses to individual questions from the parents’ and children’s interviews. Responses to the parent interviews were organized around the themes of children’s experience of places in Park Slope and the city, including: where they were allowed or not allowed to go; family indoor and outdoor rules; parents’ concerns, feelings and thoughts about raising their children in a large urban setting like New York City; and family backgrounds such as occupation, education, years and type of residence in Park Slope, parents’ childhood residence (e.g., suburb, urban, rural), and ethnicity/race.

Responses to the children’s interviews were organized around the types and number of places that they visited in the city and their neighborhood, the types of escorts to places (e.g., whether they went to these places alone or with others), the ways they got to these places (e.g., on foot, by car, or public transportation), the types of activities in which they engaged in these places, and their feelings about and knowledge of these places.

I used MapInfo (Daniel, Loree, & Whitener, 1996), a computer desktop mapping software, to organize and analyze the data obtained from the children's and parents' neighborhood maps. Using MapInfo, I created electronic maps showing the children's home and school locations, the number of places they went to alone or with others (e.g., adults, friends), and the farthest places they went to in the neighborhood. I saved this information on a spreadsheet using Excel software for the children's data from the maps, and added other relevant information such as class, gender, the child's environmental preferences, types of parental rules regarding the children's use of indoor and outdoor environment, types of access to open spaces and access to social networks in and near home, types of places where parents' grew up, types of residence, years of residence in the neighborhood, distance measured by number of blocks between the child's home location and Prospect Park, whether they were allowed to walk to school on their own, number of siblings, whether they were allowed to hang around neighborhood places, and degree of participation in organized activities in after-school programs. Then, I conducted descriptive analyses (e.g., frequencies, cross-tabulations) on these spreadsheets to discern the recurring patterns and factors in children's exploration of places in their neighborhood and city. I also compared children's and parents' maps to determine to what extent parents knew about, and were involved in, their children's everyday geographies.

An examination of these themes across the parents' and children's interviews and maps generated a range of findings about children's exploration of places in Park Slope and the city, and the factors that play an important role in their experiences.

## Limitations of the Study

As in any qualitative study, because of the small numbers involved, participants cannot be expected to be representative of their target population in a statistical sense, and the findings might not be generalized from participants in this one study to the entire population of children living in urban settings in the United States. However, this in-depth study seeks and values the perspective of the informant in order to provide accurate information about children's place exploration in one neighborhood, which might be generalizable to other Park Slope and New York City residents.

Another challenge was to get the children to remember, even with some probing, all the places that they had visited in the city. This is a frequent issue that researchers working with children in the field have to address. In one study of children's perceptions of their museum experiences, for example, the author noted that

*... the fact that 18 of the 30 children did not spontaneously mention museums, but when questioned revealed that they go to museums, raises questions about what other place-related data were not collected because children did not think of or remember places during the interview, or did not think of some places in sufficiently defined terms to mention them as specific places, or because they chose to censor their answers for reasons of their own (Jensen, 1994, p. 307).*

However, I addressed this issue in two ways: (1) I interviewed the children's parents *first*, and asked about the places that they thought their children visited in the city, and (2) I interviewed each child on at least two separate occasions. It might have been useful as a third iteration to interview parents and children together with their respective maps, and to really push a bit with the participating children to use their notebooks in order to provide more information about their place exploration.

My data are based on a self-selected group of parents and skewed toward white and middle class children and families. There were two different reasons parents chose to participate in the study. Some of the parents indicated to me that their children expressed interest in participating in the study. Other parents told me that they thought my research topic was interesting to them and thought that their child would enjoy participating in it. To try to address this issue, I tried to select more children from underserved families to participate but was only able to recruit one child from a middle class African-American family and two children from working class Latino families. Although I believe that greater participation of children from underserved families might have yielded different results in this study because their experience of the city differs from children from middle and upper middle class families, the participants I worked with did reflect the general neighborhood population.

A final issue is the age of my data and its relevance to contemporary urban children's exploration of the city. As stated above, I collected my data 10 years ago. I redress this limitation with some discussion of the situation of children's place exploration then (and now) as addressed in most recent studies of urban children's experiences of the city, and in comparing my 10-year-old child's place exploration in New York City against the experiences of the children in my study. I present this discussion in the final chapter of this dissertation as a postscript.

Despite these limitations and the fact that this research is hypothesis-generating in nature, I was able to gain some understanding about how children explore their neighborhood and the city, and the main factors that play a role in this process. My findings are organized into three major chapters: (1) children's everyday explorations and

geographies, (2) parents' perceptions of children's exploration of the urban environment, and (3) family rules and children's exploration of their neighborhood.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### IMPORTANCE AND DIMENSIONS OF CHILDREN'S PLACE EXPLORATION

*One wants more and more of the world itself, not because it is the best of all possible worlds but because it is there; not because it is ideal but because it is real; not because it contains unlimited hidden meanings—though, indeed, as we shall see, it does contain them—but because in its own right it is exciting, moving, satisfying, yet always prompting to new modes of contact, always giving birth to new hungers*  
(Murphy, 1958, p. 180).

Today's New York City for children and families is different in many aspects from the city in which I conducted my study in the mid 1990s. The city was a less friendly place for children in the mid-1990s than today. As police presence increased on city streets and playgrounds improved from the mid-1990s, there was a *public* sense that more children were present on the sidewalks of the city in the last five years. I believe that this is limited to certain areas of the city (see Nevarez de Jesus, 1999). Perceived environmental and social safety issues, especially by parents, continue to play a key role in children's exploration of the city today. In addition, two relatively recent major factors in children's and families' lives have been the advent of advanced digital technologies (e.g., computer, internet, cell phones) in home settings and the increased commercialization of children's play-spaces in the United States, especially in major cities like New York. These two processes have been pervasive in the last ten years. According the PEW Internet and American Life Project, more than two thirds of American homes (68%) have access to computers and the Internet, and "an overwhelming majority of all teenagers, 84%, report owning at least one personal media

device: a desktop or laptop computer, a cell phone or a Personal Digital Assistant” (Lenhart et al., 2005). In addition, commercial play spaces were becoming prevalent in northern industrialized countries in the late 1990s (McKendrick et al., 2000). These spaces are often located in indoor environments and equipped with batting cages, electronic games, basketball courts, mini soccer fields, and eating areas. Parents use these spaces for different purposes from keeping their children off the streets to holding children’s birthday parties.

*The geography of children’s playspace is changing once more. Having contracted at the behest of parents and their fears for their children’s safety, more expansive geographies are once again emerging through cyberspace, community provision and the development of commercial playgrounds for young children. The independent mobility which characterized children’s lives of yesteryear has not, however, been recovered: parental presence is a prerequisite for participation in the majority of the commercial playgrounds ... (McKendrick et al., 2000, pp. 112-113).*

These more recent changes have great impact on children’s exploration of places in New York City, which are not fully accounted for in my findings because they were just starting to manifest themselves in the lives of the children with whom I worked on this study. As such, my findings are better understood in the contexts of the pre-commercialization of children’s play-space and the pre-invasion of digital technologies in children’s homes, and the continuing deterioration of the quality of most local neighborhood parks, playgrounds and open spaces in New York City in the mid 1990s.

Children and the city are interrelated in myriad and subtle ways. As a complex set of mediated social and environmental relations that are always changing and becoming, they raise a host of questions, among them: how do children explore the urban

environment; how does the city form children's sense of place identity; what are their parents' perspectives of the city as a place to raise children; and what other factors influences their urban experience? Researchers have begun to provide answers to these questions about the 'ecology of children in cities' from diverse disciplines such as urban planning and design (Moore, 1986; Ward, 1978), geography (Hart, 2002; Katz, 2004), education (Middlebrooks, 1998), and psychology (Gorlitz et al., 1998; Nevarez De Jesus, 1999; Wridt, 2004). As these researchers often found, the dominant issue at the heart of this relationship is the contradictory tension between cities as rich environments for children's exploration and cities as places where children's independent exploration is increasingly restricted (Hart, 2002 & 1986; Katz, 2004; Nevarez De Jesus, 1999; Wridt, 2004).

At the same time as urban children under twelve are increasingly restricted in their spatial mobility, police statistics show a decade long drop of crime rates in cities. For example, New York City and Park Slope have been enjoying a drop in crime rates over the last 15 years, and are perceived to be relatively safe environments for children (see New York City Police Department CompStat Unit, 2005). Further, New York City as a whole and the neighborhood where I conducted my study, Park Slope, are environments rich with educational resources, and home to a vast array of commercial, residential, and park and playground places. Both are made up of culturally and ethnically diverse populations. It is under these circumstances that I examined (1) how 10-year-old children from different family backgrounds explore places in Park Slope and New York City, and (2) the factors in children's everyday lives that seem to matter in this process.

This chapter reiterates the importance of place exploration, describes children's versus adults' definitions of unsupervised place exploration, and provides profiles of urban explorers based on key dimensions of places children go with and without adult supervision, including outside their immediate neighborhood.

## **The Importance of Place Exploration for Children**

Children's independent exploration of places has socializing effects, providing them with opportunities to negotiate and understand their everyday social and physical environments through action and communication. Place exploration is critical to the development of their place identity; self-confidence and intellect; as well as environmental, cultural and social competence (Bartlett, 2002; Bartlett et al., 1999; Hart, 1979; Keller, 1998; Lynch, 1973; Mead, 1984; Moore, 1990; Newson & Newson, 1968; Proshanky & Fabian, 1987; Tuan, 1977). According to Hart (1979), "the primary force lies within each child in the form of a desire to explore and come to know the larger environment" (p. 336). Similarly, I found these children had a strong desire to explore places beyond their homes and schools independently. This drive to explore the environment independently and alone was well illustrated in my conversations with some of the children regardless of their ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. David, a white and upper middle class child, explained, "I would like to roller-blade by myself to my friend's house located on 17th Street on 7th Avenue because I just want to be independent. I don't know it's just like an urge." Elga, a Latina from a working class family, talked about her need to explore more interesting and challenging environments in the city in the following way: "Usually I have to ask first to go. ... I really like to go

different places that I've never been to. Because I usually get kind of bored going to the same place ....” This urge was fueled even more in the contexts of parental fears, restrictions, and strategies to help them negotiate the outdoor urban environment independently. Bradley, a white child from an upper middle class family, expressed vividly his need to explore distant places in the neighborhood, “... I'd like to explore 4th Avenue. ... This big chunk [From Garfield Street to Flatbush Avenue], I don't know about. I feel like I kind of have a collar around me. Because I'm straining, you know?” The children felt that independent exploration of the environment afforded them a sense of responsibility for their actions in the environment, it enabled them to act like grown-ups, and most of them indicated it was a great source of fun. This is how Tony, a white from a middle class family, shared his experience of being an independent explorer: “It's just fun. I feel like responsible and it's cool not being like—your parents not nagging you every two seconds. Tony, do this. Tony, do that.” They were itching to be independent in the outdoor urban environment, and especially to go to places they knew little about such as the Brooklyn Public Library at Grand Army Plaza and the 9<sup>th</sup> Street playground in Prospect Park.

*“She keeps asking me when she's going to be able to walk to school, which is only a few blocks away, without me in the morning and walk home without her babysitter picking her up. Because she wants to be grown up and she wants to be given that responsibility and she wants to feel older and she does know that some of her friends do it.” (Nina's mother, White, upper middle class)*

These children from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds not only reiterated the importance of independent place exploration in their everyday lives but also expressed the challenges associated with being able to explore the outdoor urban environment without parental permission. This latter point is best captured in the following conversation that I had with Bill, a white child from a middle class family.

Harouna: *“Are there any places that you went that you weren’t allowed to go by yourself?”*

Bill: *“I wish there was some. There have been times that I really wanted to go some places by sneaking out, but no. I couldn't.”*

Harouna: *“You tried?”*

Bill: *“No, I haven’t. But it took me some thought to think about it. I had to think about it.”*

Harouna: *“What were you thinking about?”*

Bill: *“I thought about going to the Brooklyn Library one or another time by myself. And then I said, no, I’d get in trouble. Big trouble. I mean, it doesn’t take that long for my parents to find that I wasn’t home.”*

## **Defining Unsupervised Place Exploration**

Before talking about children’s experiences of places alone in Park Slope, it is important to understand the different meanings urban children associated with the concept ‘alone.’ During the interview sessions, I assumed that children’s going to places

alone was a 'pure' individual experience, that is, children went places by themselves without other children or/and adults. I quickly found out that my notion of children's going to places alone as I understood it up to that point rarely happened or was not a prominent phenomenon in children's exploration of places in their neighborhood. Going to places alone was defined both on children's own and parents' terms. The children understood this notion as both going to places with friends, and/or siblings without adult supervision, but with parents' permission. Here is how Tony, Elga, and Nina defined the concept of what it means to go to places alone in the neighborhood.

Harouna: *"Do you mean you went without an adult? That's what you mean?"*

Tony: *"Yeah. That's what I mean by alone."*

Harouna: *"No adults."*

Tony: *"No adults."*

Harouna: *"But you mean with other friends."*

Tony: *"Yeah, friends. My best friends."*

Nina: *"Because once my sister forgot her back pack while we were walking to school. I just walked to school with my sister and my mom went back and once I walked to school with my friends. Well, it wasn't alone but it was with my friends."*

Harouna: *"That's what you mean by alone?"*

Nina: *"Yeah, kind of."*

Harouna: *“Do you go alone to the playground?”*

Elga: *“I go alone.”*

Harouna: *“By yourself?”*

Elga: *“I go with my sisters [one young sister and one teenager sister] and friends to play ball.”*

Harouna: *“Does Elga go alone to the playground?”*

Elga’s mother: *“She goes alone.”*

Harouna: *“By herself?”*

Elga’s mother: *“Not really. She goes with her siblings. I’m watching them.”*

For the children and parents in this study, going to places alone meant being with friends without (direct) adult supervision. Not being with adults meant being independent and able to act independently in the urban environment, which they rarely had had a chance to experience without the presence of their parents or of other supervisory adults. In this section, I use the word ‘alone’ to mean places a child goes to by him/herself and/or with friends and/or siblings. This subtle distinction of what it means to be alone or by themselves in the urban environment from children’s experiences and parents’ perspectives sheds some light into the constraints placed on children’s independent place exploration, and perhaps children’s lack of interest in going to places completely alone, because for virtually all of them being ‘alone’ in the outdoors meant being with other children and not directly supervised by adults. Indeed, most children

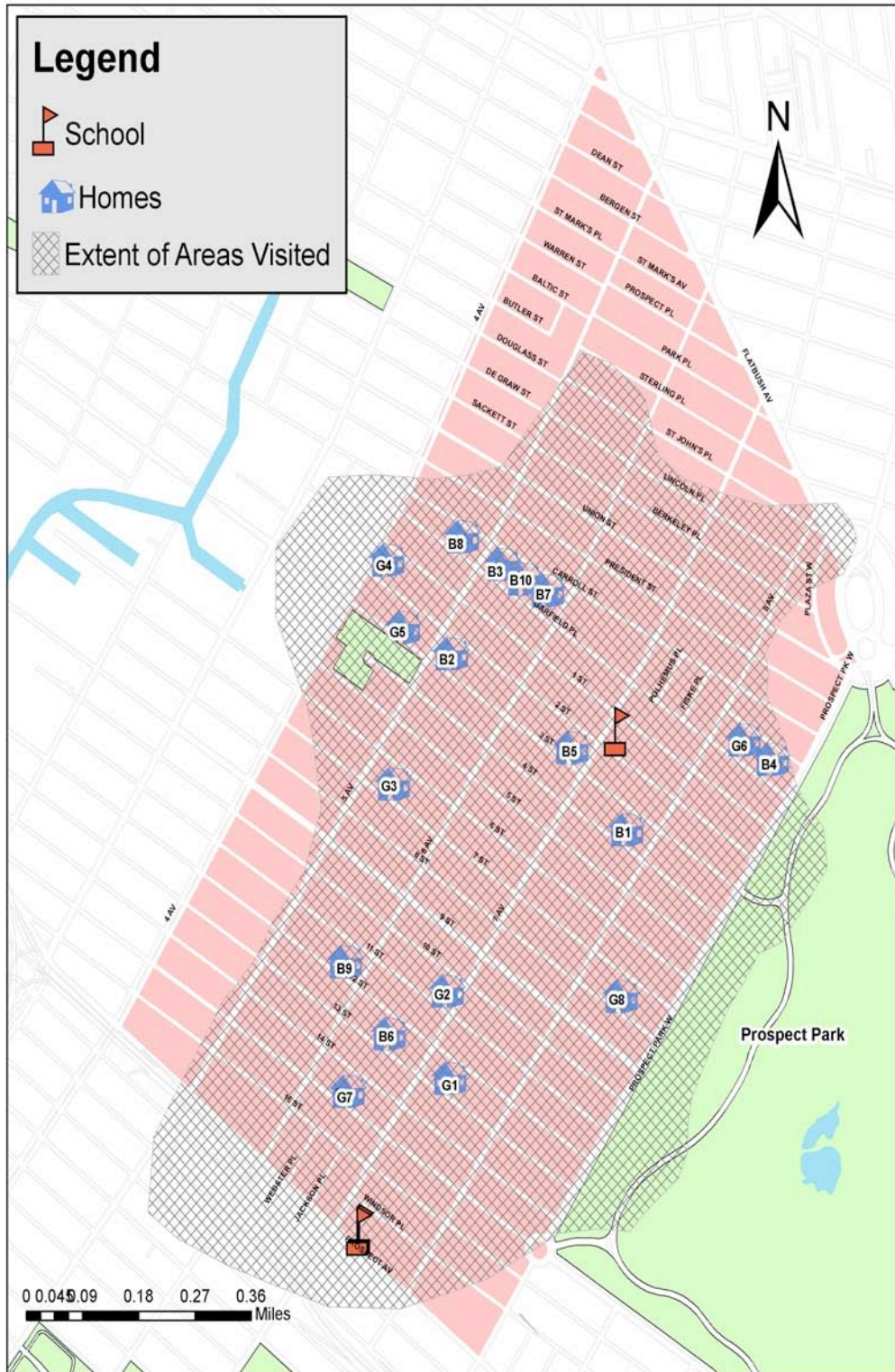
were only allowed to go to places with their friends and/or siblings, and were not allowed to go solo.

## **Dimensions of Urban Explorers**

A small number of the children (n=4) went to places without friends or adults, while another few (n=6) were not allowed to go anywhere without adults. Not surprisingly, children mentioned twice the number of ‘alone places’ than parents indicated. The children had much more detailed geographies of the places they went alone or with other kids than their parents seemed to know about (see Figure 6 & 7). Most children’s solitary exploration within their neighborhood was circumscribed to areas around their homes and schools (see Figure 6), and were located within well-defined geographic boundaries such as backyards, their blocks or nearby streets, and areas around their schools within which they could reach friends’ houses, parks and playgrounds; commercial places (stores, restaurants); and institutional places (school, library, YMCA).

*“I would say it’s a one-block radius [around his home]. One block that way, one block that way. ... I let him go during the day. On a Sunday now, he takes money and he can go get himself lunch and walk back. I let him do that on his own. That’s one block away.” (Tom’s mother, White, middle class)*

Figure 6: Children's Alone Places



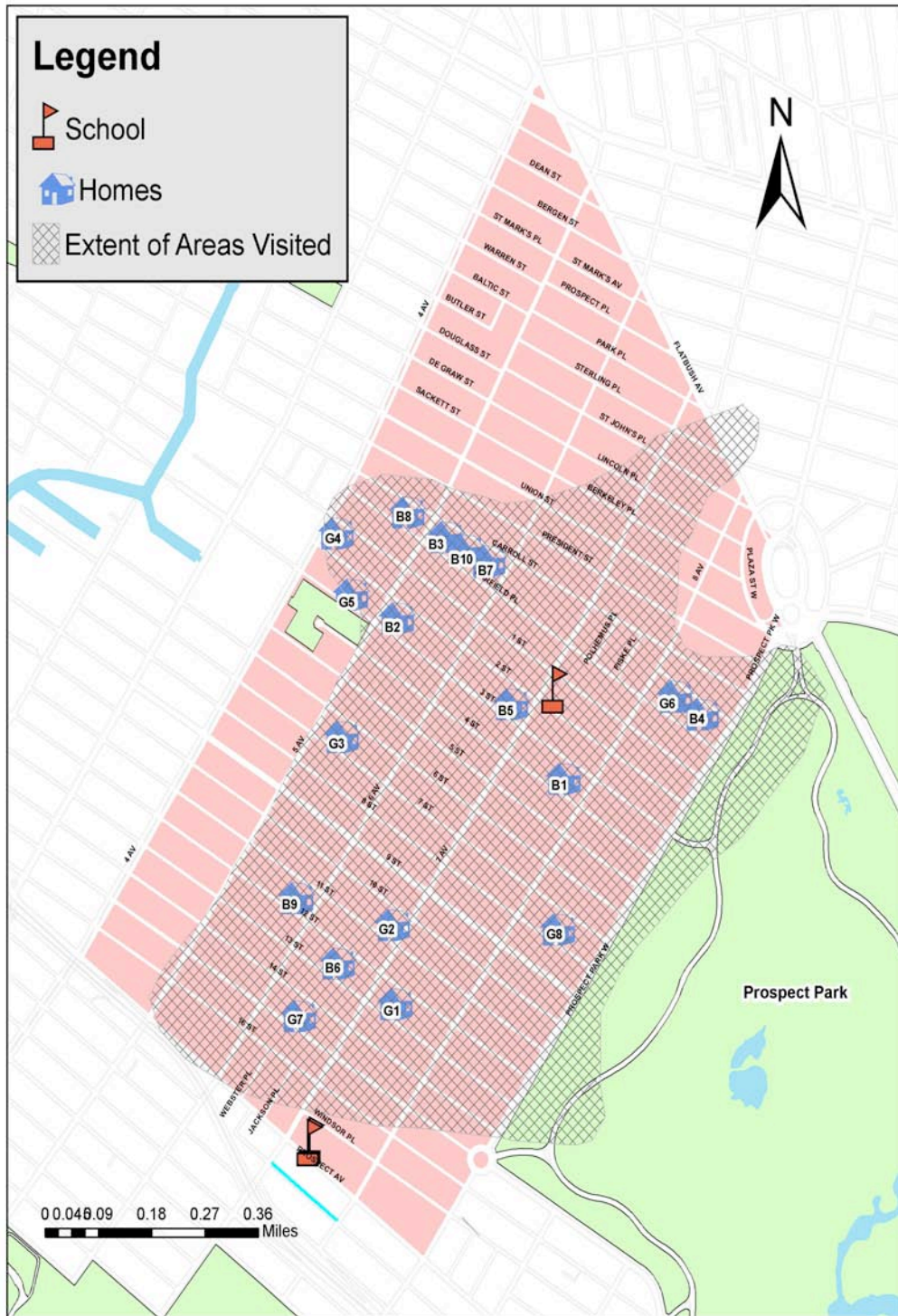
*“Most of our activities are mainly on my block. This is my school and right here we play tag all around the block. That's basically it.” (Tony, White, middle class)*

However, they went to more varied places alone from their homes (after school and on weekends) than from their schools (lunchtime). The places near their homes that they explored alone included backyards, streets, other houses, the park and other playgrounds and commercial places. The places near their schools consisted only of commercial places (restaurants, stores), which they went to during lunchtime. These differences are understandable since we know that the children had more time to explore when they were at home than when they were in school (lunchtime).

*“They [Tony and his brother] both play on the street, ... backyard. ... There are a lot of kids in this block so they'll go out, ... play tag or have a water fight, ... throw the ball against the stoop, or ... roller blade up and down the block.” (Tony's father, White, middle class)*

*“There is Pino's Pizza [on 7th Avenue between 1st and 2nd Street], which is like a place where all the kids in my school go for lunch when they go out because it is just right across the street. It is pretty much the only place that is affordable to eat at in the range of where we are allowed to go.” (Andres, bi-racial [White and Latino], middle class)*

Figure 7: Parents' Sense of Their Children's Alone Places



The children were allowed to walk to most of these places based on parents' level of comfort with the areas to be explored and their assessment of their children's level of environmental and social competence. As a result, children had different degrees of freedom to explore places alone around their homes and schools, as well places between their home and school based on children's gender and their parents' sense of their ability to negotiate challenges present in the physical and social environment such as crossing streets, dealing with strangers, and being victims of crimes. Researchers have stressed the fact that parents are more protective of girls' independent mobility than boys' because of their child-rearing conventions and ideology such as what kinds of activities are appropriate for boys and girls to engage in respectively, and the real and perceived safety issues in the child's environment such as mugging, bullying, kidnapping, molestation, traffic density (Blakely, 1993; Katz, 1993; Matthews, 1992; Hart, 1979; Nevarez De Jesus, 1999; Valentine, 1997a, 1997b & 1997c; Williams & Kornblum, 1994 & 1985; Wridt, 2004).

Similarly in my research, some children were given more freedom than others to go to places near their homes and schools alone based on their gender and perceived abilities to negotiate both the social and physical environment. Boys were given more freedom to explore the environment alone than girls, and thus went to more varied places such as friends' houses, local stores and restaurants, school, library, YMCA, and Prospect Park. While girls were allowed to go alone to friends' houses near their homes, boys were allowed to engage in physical activities with their friends without adult supervision by running up and down the street, running in and out of friends' homes, and playing sports on sidewalks. Most girls went by themselves to friends' houses close to their

homes and nowhere else. Hart (1979) found that “a larger proportion of girls’ trips away from their homes are “social” (i.e., to other people’s homes) in nature compared to those of boys” (p. 332), because, he explained, “girls [have] more restricted opportunities to engage with the environment unaccompanied; approval comes more readily to go to other people’s homes than it does to go out alone to see what is happening” (p. 85). Likewise in the present study, I found the same result 30 years later. Further, parents in my study did not indicate or did not seem to be aware that boys were often given more freedom to explore their neighborhood.

Walking to school alone was a critical activity for most of the children (cf: My colleagues in Japan say the journey to school is one of the only chances children get to do un-programmed things with their peers). It was a source of constant negotiation between child and parent. The process of wanting to go to school alone started for some of the children when they were eight years old, but parents always felt that even though the children might have been physically competent to walk to school on their own at that age, they were not socially mature enough to handle most of the safety issues (e.g., strangers) that might arise during their independent negotiation of the urban environment. Most children were allowed to walk to school alone by age 10, and commonly walked to school with friends. “Yeah actually I usually go to school with three other friends.” (Andres) However, more boys walked to school alone than girls, and some of the children, including girls and boys, were not yet allowed to walk to school on their own (see Table 6).

Table 6: Permission to walk to and from school alone

<b>Walk to and from school</b>	<b>Girls (n=8)</b>	<b>Boys (n=10)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Allowed (n=11)	3	8	11
Not allowed (n=7)	5	2	7

The location of children's homes in relationship to school and the ability to know that their children arrived safely at school were critical for some parents in granting children permission to go to school without adult supervision. Some children's routes required them to negotiate 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, which had heavy and fast-moving traffic because of the way the traffic lights were set up. The traffic lights would be green for the cars for at least ten blocks, which made it difficult for children living between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue to be allowed to walk to school alone. Of the seven children who were not allowed to go to school alone, five of them lived between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue. As it turns out this was a wealthy neighborhood, and these restricted children were from upper middle class families.

*“I know some of her friends do walk to school without adult supervision. I just feel that there are too many uncontrollable situations and I would rather know that they walk into the school building and me see them walk into the building, because if they for some reason didn't show up at school in the morning, I wouldn't know. They wouldn't call me to say ‘You're child's not in school today.’ They would assume she was home sick, so*

*that's one reason. The other thing is that crossing 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue here can be a little bit dangerous because cars come speeding down here in the morning. A number of her friends who do walk to school don't have to negotiate 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. They live closer to the school or on the same side of 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue as the school and they don't have to cross any main streets, so that's also an issue for me." (Nina's mother)*

These usually clear cut lines drawn between boys' and girls' exploration of alone places in their neighborhood mask often key subtleties that researchers have increasingly been uncovering in the context of changes in parents' ideologies of childrearing practices, which often allow children to negotiate to a certain extent where they can go and what they can do in the outdoor environment alone (Hart, 1979; Nevarez De Jesus, 1999; Moore, 1990; Spencer & Woolley, 2000; Valentine, 1997a, 1997b & 1997c; Wridt, 2004). In my research, although most of the children were allowed to different degrees to be independent around their homes and schools based on gender, there were two very distinct groups of children who had a totally different degree of freedom to explore the neighborhood alone. This was not based solely on gender, and parents' assessment of their child's social and environmental abilities and competencies, but on other social and cultural factors such as family lifestyles, parents' ideologies of childrearing practices, and parents' perceptions of safety in the neighborhood. I refer to these two groups, which represented boys as well as girls in my sample, as the 'independent explorers' (see Figure 8 & 10) and 'supervised explorers' (see Figure 12 & 14).

## **The Independent Explorers**

The independent explorers (n=4) are the children who explored places in the neighborhood without adult supervision. They were allowed to go to places with friends and/or siblings. Their parents provided them a lot of freedom to engage in exploratory activities within the neighborhood boundaries.

The independent explorers, comprised of three White middle class boys and one Latina working class girl, were given a lot of leeway in their solitary exploration of places, and were not required to be with friends during their independent travels in the neighborhood. As Figure 8 and 10 make clear, the independent explorers in this study had the most expansive spatial range in my study. They went alone to more varied places and places farthest from their home and school without being accompanied by adults, friends, and/or siblings. As a result, their maps of alone places were very different from their parents' and the other children's (see Figure 8, 9, 10 & 11).

Figure 8: Independent Explorer Maria's Places Alone and with Peers

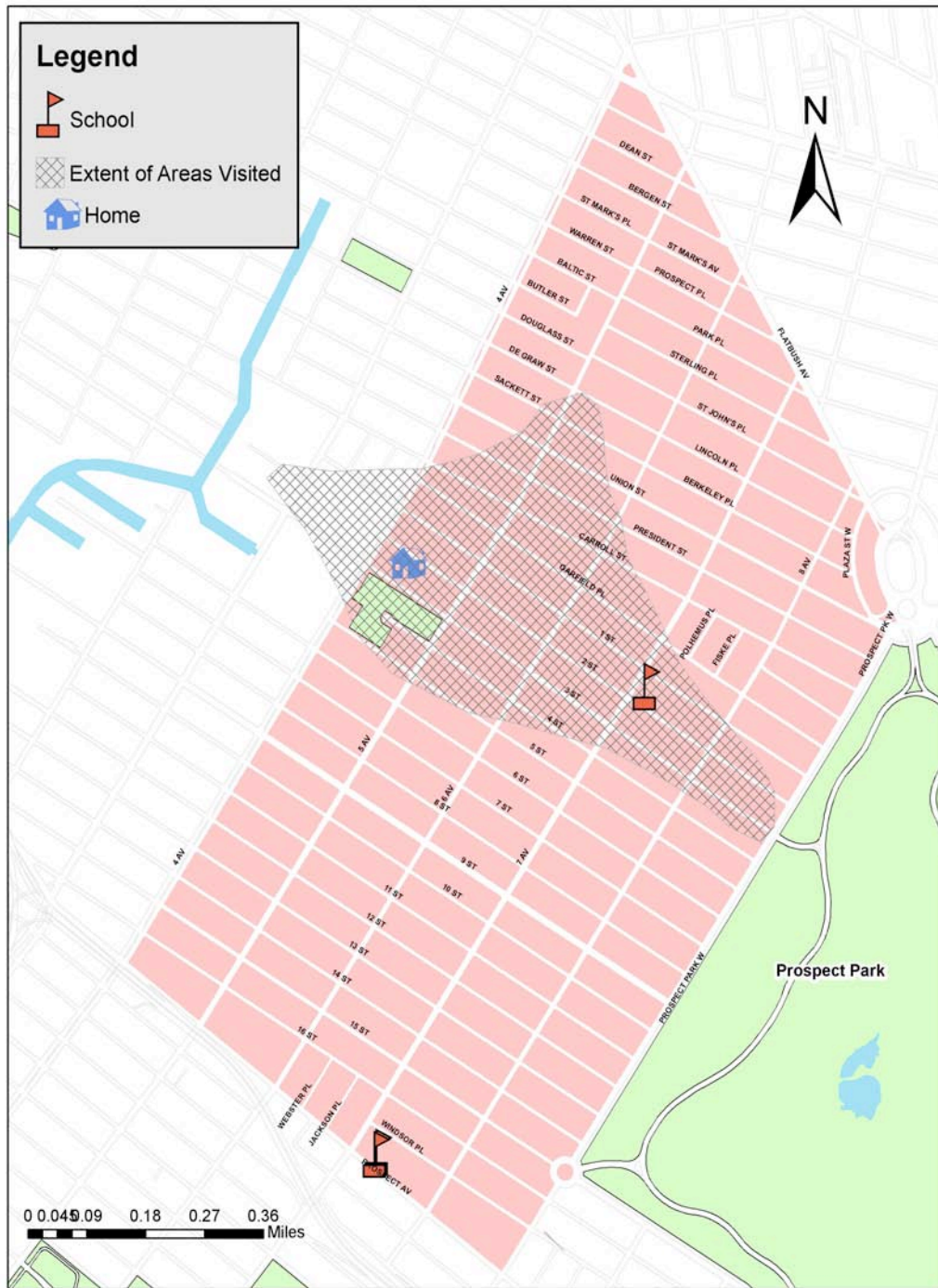


Figure 8 shows the general area in the neighborhood that one of the independent explorers, Maria, explored alone and with peers. Maria, who is Puerto Rican and from a working class family, was born and raised in Park Slope, and has nine siblings (ages range between 3 and 24). Their four-story brick house is located five blocks from Prospect Park, and three blocks from her school. Maria, who did not have access to her backyard, told me that she liked being in the outdoor environment, and was given a lot of freedom to be in the outdoor environment by her parents. One of her favorite outdoor places in the neighborhood is the playground by the 9<sup>th</sup> Street entrance in Prospect Park. Maria's mother describe her as an outdoor child. "She likes outdoor more. All the time, she likes it outside." Maria presented herself to me as a very independent and responsible child, who had a lot of friends in the neighborhood, and a lot of responsibilities. She helped her mother with the cooking, babysat for neighbors, did her young sibling's and her laundry at the laundromat located three blocks away from her house, and dropped her young siblings to school before going herself to school. Maria's mother, was the only parent in my study, who told me candidly that Maria knew more about her own experiences of the neighborhood than she did. In fact, I was able to confirm this by comparing Maria's and her mother's maps about places that she experienced in the neighborhood (see Figure 8 & 9). Maria spent most of her time in Park Slope rather than the rest of the city. She also went to commercial places in Manhattan with family members and relatives, and to educational places like the Bronx Zoo and museums during school fieldtrips.

Figure 9: Mother's Sense of Maria's Places Alone and with Peers

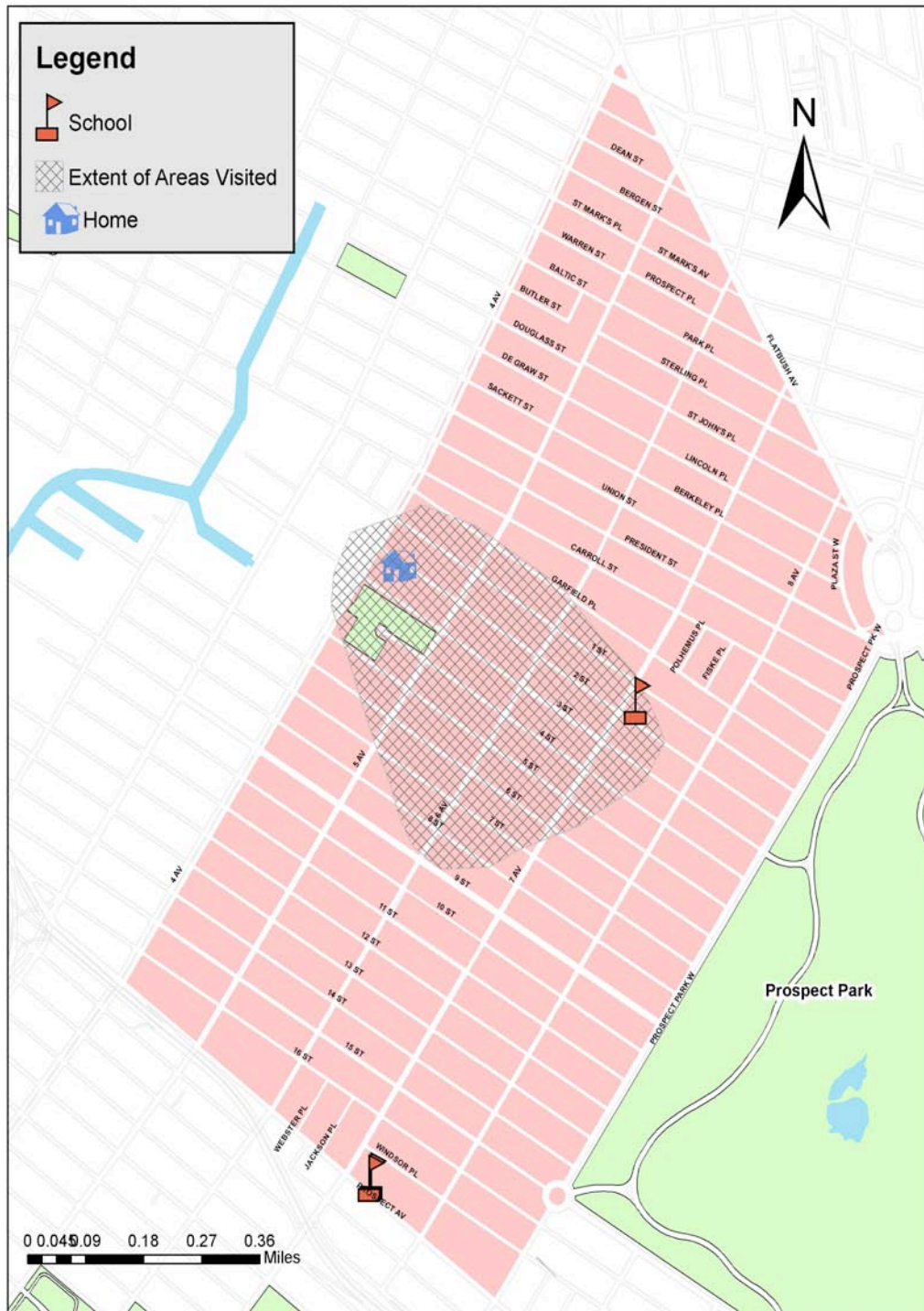


Figure 10 shows another independent explorer, George. He is white, from a middle class family, and has two siblings. His family lives in a three-bedroom ground floor apartment in a four-story coop building, located three and a half blocks away from Prospect Park and one and a half blocks away from his school. George had access to a backyard with a play area and garden, as well as a network of friends in the neighborhood. George's parents have a positive attitude toward the neighborhood as a place to raise their children. George's father said, "We like it [the neighborhood] very much for children. It's a wonderful neighborhood here for children because there's so much—it is a safe neighborhood. ... We're very fortunate about that." According to his dad, "he's very trustworthy. He's a very responsible kid." George liked to be in the outdoor environment playing with friends, riding his bike up and down his block, and running errands for his parents at nearby stores. George's favorite outdoor activity is playing sports, especially baseball. "I think he just likes running around better than anything else. He's involved in a lot of organized sports. He plays baseball and basketball with the same group of kids. The teams are almost identical, all two sports. He's been with these kids for four or five years now. But, I mean, he plays ball a lot. He runs errands for us on Fifth Avenue. He goes to Key Food. We think he has an obligation. He's supposed to pitch in." George spent a lot of time in the neighborhood and traveled occasionally to educational places (e.g., Aquarium in Coney Island, Bronx Zoo, museums) and commercial places (e.g., Shea and Yankee Stadiums). Despite his latitude to explore places independently in the neighborhood, George's map was very similar to his father's map (see Figure 10 & 11), which means that his parents knew exactly where he was most of the time.

Figure 10: Independent Explorer George's Alone Places

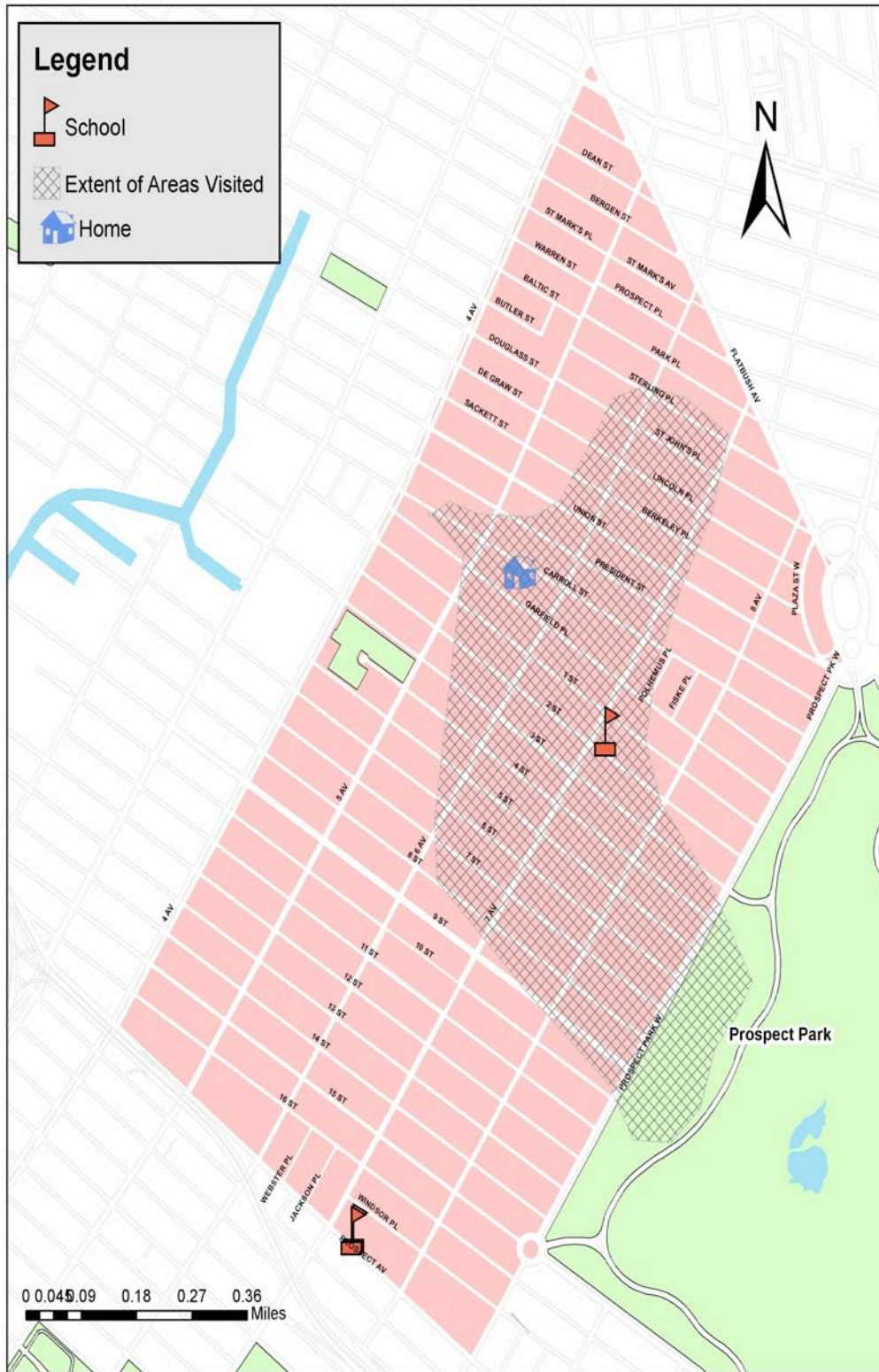
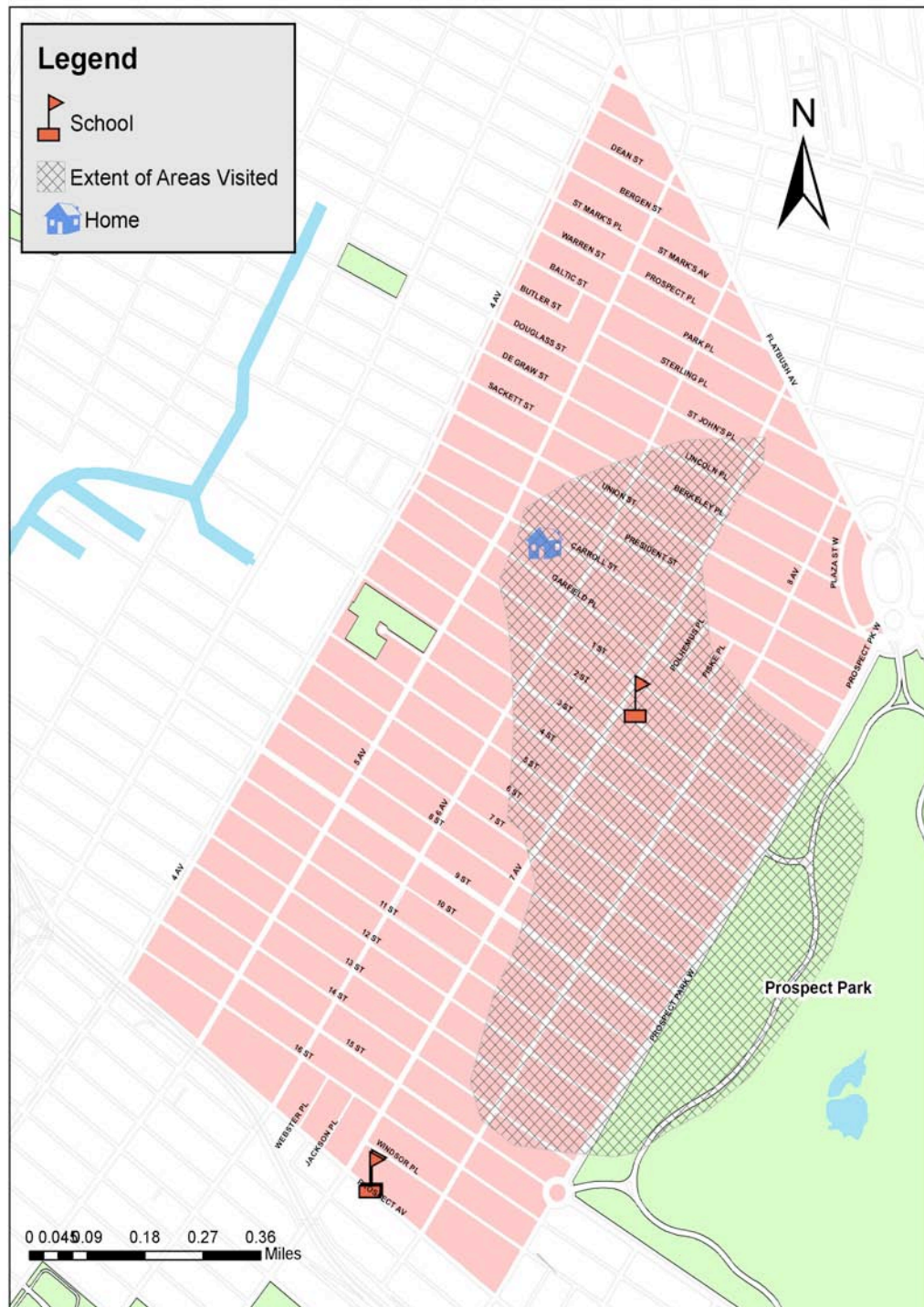


Figure 11: Mother's Sense of George's Places Alone and with Peers



Why were they allowed to be so independent? The independent explorers had extensive networks of friends (including adults) in the neighborhood, were given family responsibilities (e.g., running errands, doing laundry, cooking), and were characterized as being outdoor kids by their parents. According to his father, George is a very independent, trustworthy, and responsible child, “He likes to go to places by himself. He goes all up and down Seventh Avenue by himself. ... He has friends right down the street. ... He likes to run errands for us. ... We think he has an obligation. He’s supposed to pitch in.” George said, “I walk by myself to the YMCA, Brooklyn Public Library [on 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue], and temple. ... I’m allowed to go to most places as long as I am careful.” Tony, who is allowed to spend time with his friends around the 9th Street entrance in Prospect Park, explained: “I usually meet up with my friends there. We hang out near the playground, band shell, soccer and baseball fields.” However, this is how Tony’s father explained the conditions under which he is allowed to go independently to Prospect Park: “On days that he has baseball practice and soccer practice he will go from school with his friends to Prospect Park. Usually they’re a lot of kids that live in these blocks that he’ll walk back with.” Furthermore, their parents built networks with neighbors who had children the same age, perceived the neighborhood to be very safe for children, trusted their children’s abilities to negotiate both the physical and social environment on their own, including how to handle traffic, knowing how to use traffic lights when crossing streets and avenues, and knowing how to deal with strangers in the spaces they were allowed to go.

One key aspect of the independent explorers’ abilities to go to places alone in the neighborhood was that parents gradually and constantly assessed and supported their

children's environmental and social competence. While they did not all allow their children to go out totally on their own, they felt comfortable to let them go out with peers and siblings. Jan's mother said, "There are some days like that when I work late and she's finished at 12:00 [with school], .... So she takes her bike over to the movies with her friend ..., go to these friends' houses [pointing at places on map] and reconnect with me back at school." As a result, most of them were very confident, comfortable and excited about exploring places in the neighborhood without adult supervision at this stage of their development, and often initiated going to places with their friends. Andres' mother, who had two children, explained the process of how she came to the decision of letting Andres explore and hang out with friends in the neighborhood:

*"I kept John [Andres' older brother] from going any place by himself that wasn't on the block for a long time. Even if he went from here to his friend's house down the block, across the street, I would look out the window to make sure he got there. I think, in retrospect, that was kind of silly. He really needed more freedom. So when he finally got to the point where he was ready to do things like go to the Y by himself after school, or he went with a friend actually, the two of them would go after school to the Y and take classes and come home. I realized at that point, he could have been doing this for some time. He could have had more freedom. Andres, I've been a lot easier with. Like for example, if John used to go out and play with his friends, I would go out too. Andres and the boys on this block, who are all ten years old, they all go outside. They have been doing*

*that for some time now so that is not something new. They all run around.*

*They basically have a pack, the Carroll Street pack. We let them run.”*

*(Andres' mother)*

## **The Supervised Explorers**

The supervised explorers (n=6), who were comprised of three white boys, two white girls and one African-American girl mainly from the upper middle class families, were more restricted in their independent mobility around their homes and schools, and more generally in the neighborhood than the other children in the study (see Figure 12, 13, 14 & 15). They were rarely allowed to go to places alone under any circumstance, and thus even went to playgrounds and commercial places near their homes with other children and adults. In practical terms, the home range of the supervised children was so restricted that in essence they had no independent home range at all to explore (Spencer & Wolley, 2000). These parents expressed differently the ways that their children ended up being supervised explorers. Terri's mother acknowledged the fact that her child hadn't had many opportunities to experience the neighborhood on her own: "It hasn't actually happened that she has walked all by herself very often. Usually she ends up being with somebody." Tisha's mother was much more clearer about where her daughter could go to alone: "No. She doesn't go anywhere alone. Except into the courtyard inside this building. She's never been anywhere by herself." This is what Ivan had to say his experience as a supervised explorer: "I go to places mostly with my parents or somebody [other adults]. I'm not really allowed to go any place by myself." As a

result of this constant supervision, parents knew exactly where their children were and what they were up to (see Figure 12, 13, 14 & 15).

The role of adults with the supervised explorers was to monitor the situation and protect the children from both social and physical dangers. These parents believed that their children were trustworthy, responsible, and able to get to places on their own, but were not socially mature enough to handle perceived unpredictable dangers in the urban environment. They felt that this was especially true for girls, who were perceived as being more vulnerable than boys in the outdoor environment. These perceptions were grounded on parents' assessment of their children's degrees of comfort being alone in the outdoor environment.

*“When I feel that she can cross the street safely on her own. Since she’s a girl, I think that she will not have as much independence as her brother [who is 13 years old]. Not as early. No. So that’s why she doesn’t go anywhere by herself at all. Never.” (Tisha’s mother)*

Parents expressed frustration in the impossibility of knowing and being able to control everything that could happen to their children in the outdoor environment, and the lack of engaging and safe play resources for children around their homes and schools. As compared to the independent explorers, these children did not maintain an extensive network of friends in the neighborhood, were not given much family responsibility (e.g., running errands, doing laundry picking up siblings), and were identified as being indoor kids by their parents. This led some parents to monitor and supervise closely these

children's exploration of places around their homes, and walks to and from school. The supervised explorers did not make distinctions about their social and environmental abilities, and believed that they were competent to go to places alone without adult supervision because they were becoming more aware of what was going on around them in the outdoor environment. They nevertheless acknowledged and respected their parents' protective attitudes toward them and the limits this necessarily placed on their need to explore the environment near their homes and schools independently.

*"I kind of feel like I can walk by myself. Because when I'm with a friend walking to school (with her father following them at a distance), there has been maybe once every time I walk to school with her, there's like she has started to walk into the street and there has been a car coming and I stop her. So I feel very much like I know what I'm doing especially compared to her. So I do have very much confidence. So I think that I could. I am always kind of looking around, especially in the street. And I feel like I do that a lot. I mean I feel like I could walk home by myself. If my parents don't, I think that's fine. My mom said once because we were walking home and there was this kind of crazy guy kind of wandering down our street and she said that's why. And, I don't know. She just doesn't think I'm big enough. She says probably by the end of the year I'll be able to but not yet." (Roberta)*

Figure 12 shows the general area in the neighborhood where one of the supervised explorers, Lori, was allowed to explore places alone and with peers. Lori is a white child from a middle-class family. She had one older sibling, lived in a duplex apartment in a three-story brownstone building located two blocks away from Prospect Park and six blocks away from her school. She was not allowed to walk to and from school by herself. Lori's mother spent a lot of time teaching Lori how to negotiate the outdoor environment independently. Lori felt her mother's overprotectiveness and resented it. "My child is an indoor child. She has a very active fantasy life, and she reads four or five hours a day. She's reading *Little Women* right now. She reads 3 to 4 books a week. When she's inside, she likes to read. That's a favorite activity when she is inside." Lori had a playroom where she could use a stereo or television, and play with her kitchen and other fantasy toys. Lori's world of imagination, fantasy play, and character developments in the indoor environment was transported to the outdoor environment. Even in the outdoor environment her best friend and she often engaged in the same activities. Lori's mother said: "Her favorite outside even is fantasy play. She and her friend become pirates or sailors or orphans. She often plays out my parents are dead, we've run away, there's some malady, something that's happened to them, some horrible fate. And they're sisters, they're equal. But they're alone. And they just talk, you know, they say 'ok, this is what happened. No, I like this, ok, you say...' Rarely do they act the character, but they plan the character. And sometimes their play goes outside. And it involves costumes. Mainly it's their heads. And the verbal." It's not surprising that her mother believed that Lori's liked to be more in the indoor than outdoor environment. It was also the way she set things up for her daughter. Their two maps were very similar

and show a very restricted territorial range, which was localized around Lori's home (see Figure 12 & 13).

Figure 12: Supervised Explorer Lori's Places Alone and with Peers

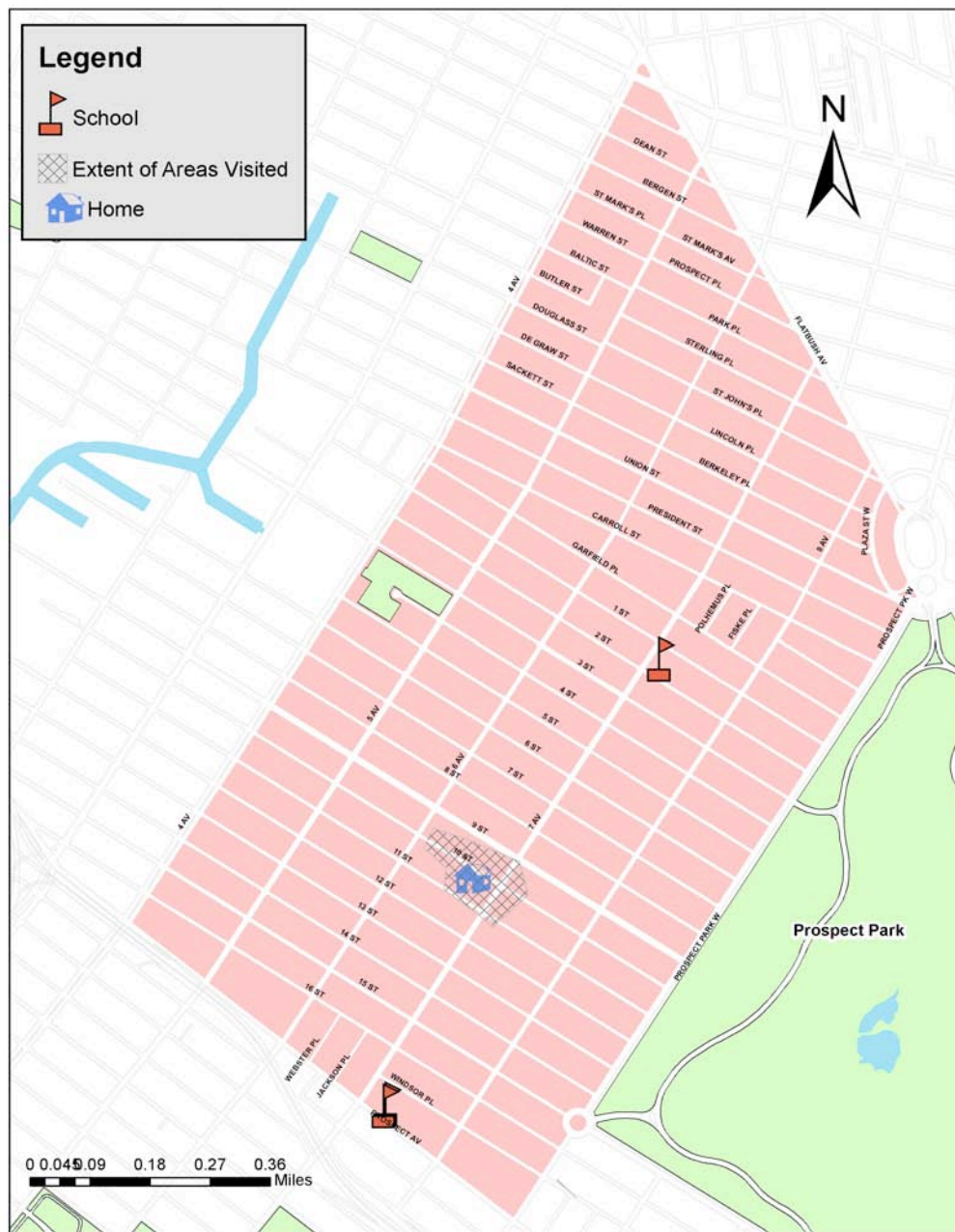


Figure 13: Mother's Sense of Lori's Places Alone and with Peers

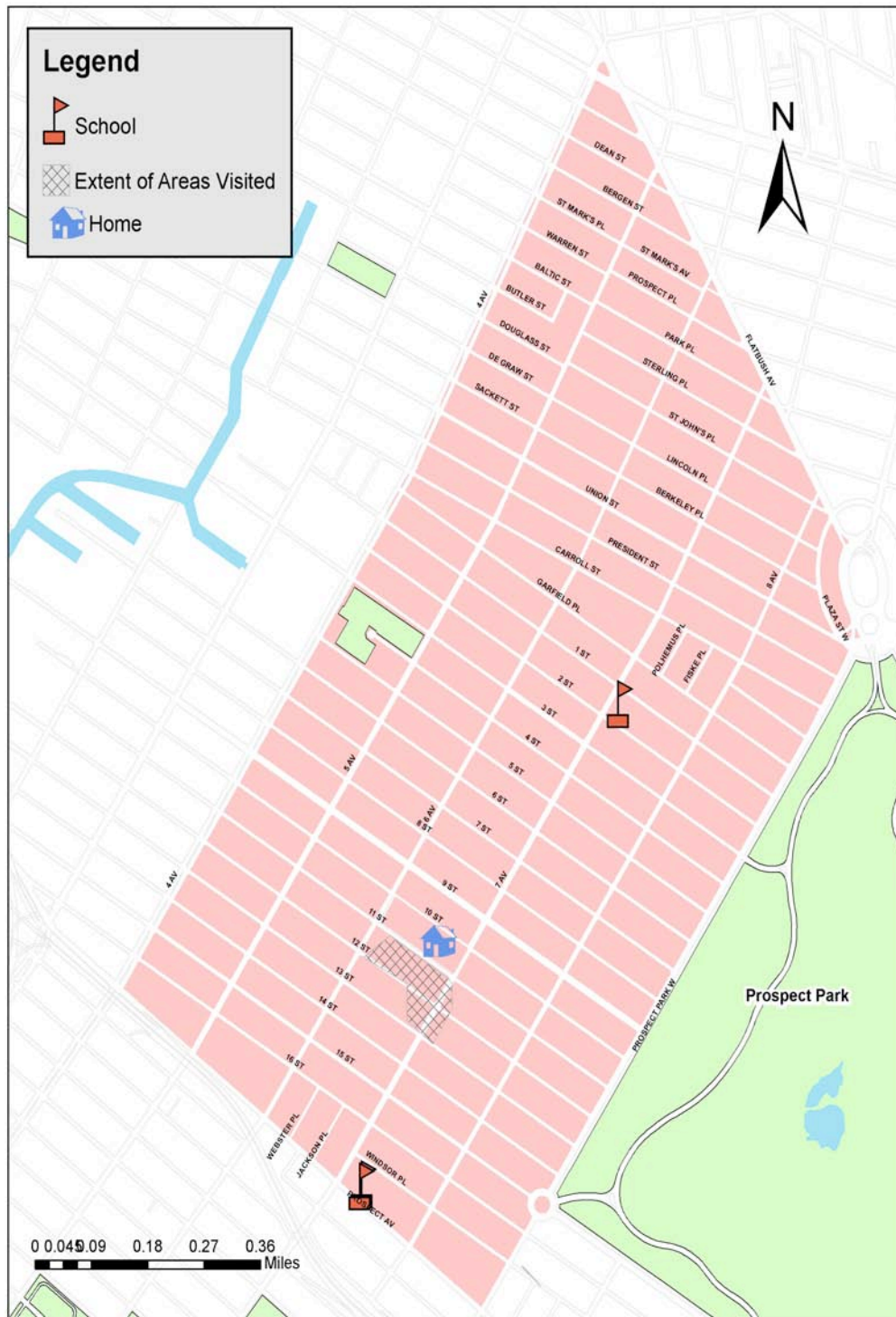


Figure 14 illustrates the general area that Bradley, another supervised explorer, said that he explored alone and with peers. Bradley is a white boy from an upper middle class family. He had two siblings and lived in a townhouse located a half block from Prospect Park and three blocks from his school. He had access to a landscaped garden and a play area with a basketball hoop in his backyard, and spent a lot of time inside his house playing computer games and watching TV. Bradley's mother described Bradley as a responsible child, who had a good sense of direction, and liked to play basketball outside. "I trust his judgment of things, where he's going." However, Bradley felt restricted in his ability to explore the outdoor environment independently and expressed vividly a great need to explore on his own. This is how Bradley explained his need to engage in more place exploration: "Trying to like explore the boundaries. I wouldn't say I'm a lazy person, but I don't get out very much. If I need physical extracurricular activity to do, I'll stand on my stoop and play stoop-ball. But that doesn't do much." However, Bradley's mother believed that Bradley had gotten used to being an indoor child, which she thought was a "normal" way of life for city children. His mother did not indicate any place on her map that Bradley went to on his own and with peers, which is slightly different from Bradley's account (see Figure 14 & 15).

Figure 14: Supervised Explorer Bradley's Places Alone and with Peers

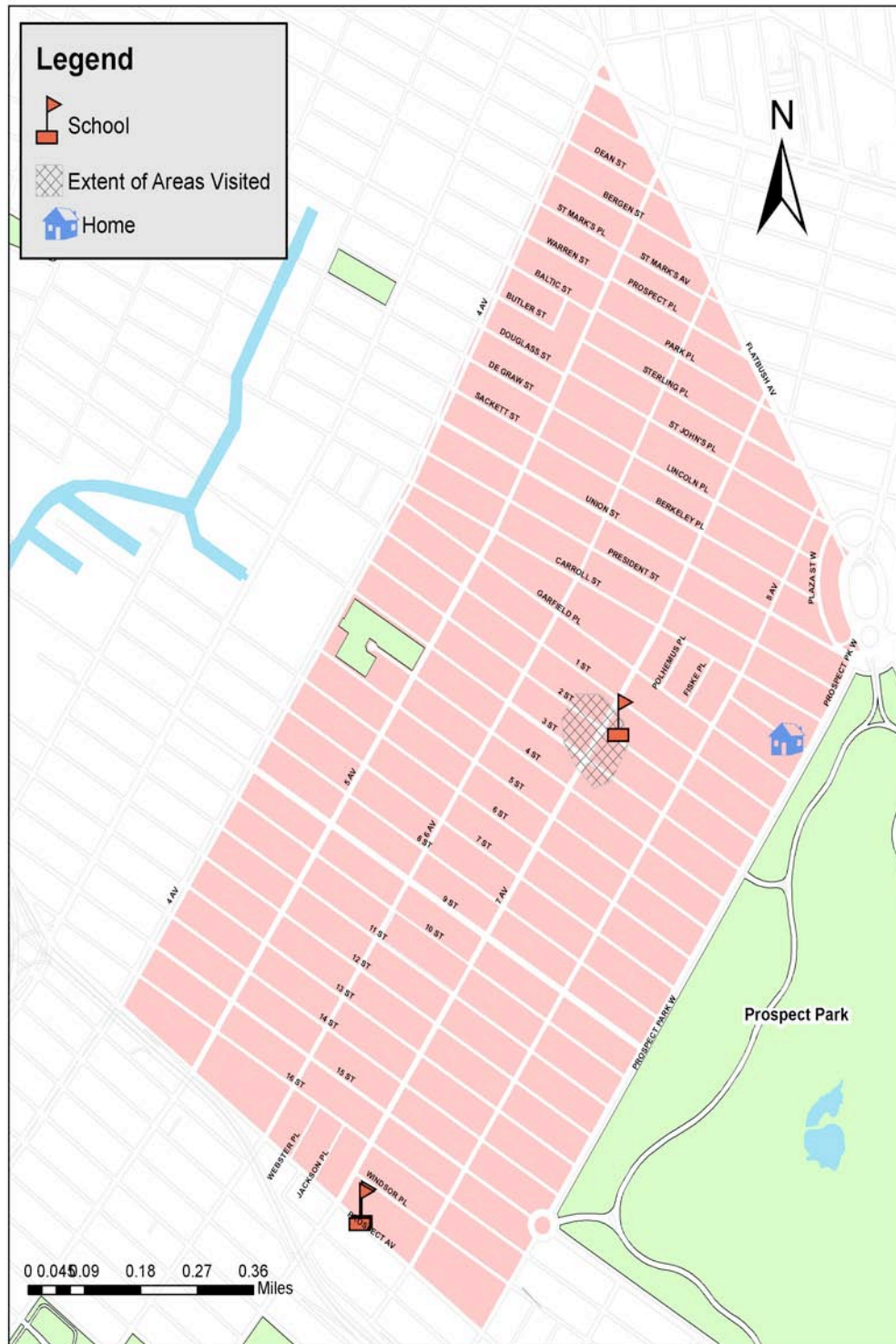


Figure 15: Mother's Sense of Bradley's Places Alone and with Peers



Allowing their children to go to places alone while protecting them against the perceived social and physical dangers to children associated with the urban environment were a source of concern for parents (see Blakely, 1994; Bjorklid, 1994; Hart, 1979; Katz, 2004; Moore, 1990; Nevarez de Jesus, 1999; Wridt, 2004). My conversations with parents about this tension brought up a lot of safety issues such as the dangers they saw in certain areas of the neighborhood, not trusting people they don't know being around their children at local playgrounds and parks, which was especially true and frequent for parents of girls. This is how Elga's mother put it: "I trust my daughter, but I don't trust people around. Because at this time you're not going to be trusting nobody, too many things you see on the news and TV. You never know what can happen." Nina's mother shared the same view about trusting her child's abilities to negotiate the physical environment on her own, but had difficulties with the dangers present in the social environment. She added she did not want to make her daughter feel paranoid about independently exploring outdoor environments. "I want her to grow up and be independent, but yet I want her to be aware that there are dangers that she has to be aware of and I just feel that at ten maybe she's not quite ready to deal with that." One of the main concerns for parents about letting their children explore places alone was traffic safety (see also, Bjorklid, 1994). These constant worries about traffic dangers were a source of stress for parents and have effect on children's lack of opportunities to explore independently distant places in their neighborhood and city. This is how Terri's mother indicated how she felt about this situation: "... I feel as though for safety reasons there's a little part of her development that has been a little arrested. She hasn't been allowed to be out there on her own and grow confident and everything because you worry too much.

But I regret that. ... So, that's it. Now that you think that I'm a totally paranoid parent.”

However, most parents in my study were aware of their children's need to be environmentally and socially competent to explore the urban environment alone, and came to accept or at least to deal with the fact at some point their children have to experience the environment without them or other adults. Given that soon these children would have to travel independently to middle school, parents were beginning to make sure their children had adequate environmental and social competences to negotiate the urban environment on their own. Parents were eager to see their children be environmentally and socially competent to deal with the challenges of the urban environment at this point in their development. They wanted their children to be *independently* comfortable using city streets and public transportation by exhibiting the capacity to handle their urban fears. I address how children experience supervised place exploration in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE EXPERIENCING SUPERVISED PLACE EXPLORATION

*The spaces of consequence in children's everyday lives tend to be extraordinarily local. In contemporary U.S. cities, for instance, children under twelve spend almost all their time within a few kilometers of where they live: in the homes of family members or friends, in school, and in the open spaces of their neighborhoods (Katz, 2004, p. 163).*

As children's need to explore independently increased, their exploration of places beyond their homes and schools was largely dependent on adults' supervision and support. The location and types of places did not seem to lessen the level of supervision. Whether they went by themselves or/and with friends and/or siblings to places throughout their neighborhood and the city, most children (14 out of 18) were always under the supervision of adults: six of them were *always* supervised while the remaining eight were supervised to a lesser degree. Perhaps not surprisingly, however, children's place exploration in the neighborhood and beyond expanded as a result of being supervised and supported. Most of the children explored places in myriad ways, but their experiences, which consisted of going to commercial places, parks and playgrounds, and institutional places, were very similar, and further, were seen by their parents in similar ways. Most parents and children talked about the same furthest places. This finding demonstrates that most children were escorted to distant places and thus most parents knew exactly the furthest places their children explored in the neighborhood and city. They went with friends, siblings, and adults to these places located throughout and beyond their neighborhood.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the children's everyday supervised place exploration, including places near their homes and schools, as well as throughout and beyond their neighborhoods, the conditions under which they are allowed to explore the urban environment and the factors influencing their everyday place exploration in New York City in the mid 1990s.

## **Exploration of Places in Park Slope**

The children participating in this study explored varied places in the neighborhood when accompanied by an adult, and as a result, expanded their spatial range and place exploration activities. Most of the children had crisscrossed the neighborhood many, many times, and were quite familiar with most commercial places, parks and playgrounds, residential places, and institutional places. The common refrains among the children about their place exploration in the neighborhood were typified by, "I have been to a lot of places in the neighborhood. I have been to, like, everywhere almost." Most parents said the same thing in slightly different ways. As Bradley's mother put it, "We use the neighborhood quite extensively. We go to the library frequently. We go to the park all the time. We go all up and down 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. We do a lot of shopping on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue."

The children engaged in a range of activities in Park Slope. They visited with friends to play and hang around together, attend birthday parties, took music and quilting classes at different after-school programs, played organized sports and rode their bikes in Prospect Park. Children reported that they liked and knew about the places they went to with adults because of the amount of activities and social interactions going on in them.

Most of the children were supervised, but were also supported to explore places regardless of gender. Most parents helped their children to negotiate traffic, and introduced them to local storeowners for safety purposes. They took their children wherever the child had to go or wanted to go in the neighborhood (e.g., play-dates, birthday parties, Prospect Park and playgrounds), and often took them along while running their own errands in the neighborhood. In addition to talking about the most common places that the children went to with adults included: parks and playgrounds, commercial places, and friends' homes, I discuss the issue of parent's over-supervision of their children's exploration of places in the neighborhood and its consequences.

### **Parks and playgrounds**

There was only one small park in Park Slope (located at 3<sup>rd</sup> Street between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenues), and it was perceived by most families, especially the three families who lived near it, as unsafe for their children without adult supervision. Thus most families in this study did not use it. Most parents and children indicated using Prospect Park extensively. Jan illustrated this point well, "I've been everywhere in Prospect Park, at the lake and ice skating rink. I bike around the park with my friends, sister and parents." The park can be considered the "backyard" of the neighborhood. It afforded a range of otherwise scarce resources vital to children's place exploration, including access to open spaces and different landscape types such as meadows and valleys, and engagement in a range of physical, social, and learning activities (e.g., walking on wooded trails, biking and roller-blading, ice skating, feeding animals, finding quiet and peaceful places,

enjoying a large body of water). It was the most frequently mentioned as the furthest place visited in Park Slope by both children and parents.

*“Really we have been all over the park. I can’t think of any place in the park that we haven’t been. We go to the park a lot, especially at the Vale of Cashmere. ... It’s very isolated, and a beautiful place. Even on a cold day when it is very windy, you can go down there and there is no wind. ... Sometimes we go and walk around the meadow. Sometimes we go to the playgrounds with friends.” (Andres’ mother)*

*“I know my way around Prospect Park. I’ve been more or less everywhere in the park. I’ve been to the other side of the lake, to the zoo, and ice skating rink with my dad. With the dog on the weekends, we [with his mother] take a walk around the park with the dog. We would go along the paths, sometimes we’d go into the woods a little, on dirt paths.” (Bradley)*

Most children were familiar with its different micro-geographies such as the lake and ice-skating rink, zoo, carousel, serene places like the Vale of Cashmere with its fountains, sports fields, band-shell and playgrounds, tunnels and small bridges, trails and roads, and meadow and ponds. Further, teachers of the students who participated in this study used Prospect Park as a science laboratory. Although most of the children walked

to Prospect Park, the park also provided opportunities for parents and children to bicycle without fear of dense car traffic.

*“We go to 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and then we take the bike path up. We usually bike on Sundays is when we do it, in the spring and the summer when the park’s closed to traffic. It’s as much his thing as my thing.” (Tom’s mother)*

By Park Slope definitions, the furthest area that most children went to in the neighborhood was located in Prospect Park. The lake and skating rink located next to each other were the main attractions in this distant area of the park because they afforded children safe access to a substantial body of water, birds and other animals, and a range of other activities such as ice skating during the winter. The lake and skating rink stood out as the special areas that drew children furthest from their homes. The children traveled on average approximately one-half mile to get there from their homes.

*“It [the area around the lake] is just really nice. I like to watch all the birds and stuff. There is usually a lot of stuff going on around there. A lot of people are doing things around the lake. In the summer there is the paddleboats. It is just a good place to just sit around.” (Tom)*

*“I like to see the ducks eating. They are pretty used to me because I’m there all the times. I go there every day in the summer. I go there five times a month during school.” (Ivan)*

Although children rarely mentioned going to playgrounds in the neighborhood, they reported going to the playground in Prospect Park by the 9<sup>th</sup> Street entrance, which had play structures appropriate for their age level, had a much more open space surrounded by trees, had well-maintained toilet facilities for boys and girls, and was frequented by a lot of children and parents. It was unlike most playgrounds in the neighborhood, which were designed for much younger children, were not spacious, and did not have toilet facilities. Most of the independent explorers in this study went frequently to this playground, and indicated it was one of their favorite places in the neighborhood. ‘Having fun’ and socializing were the most commonly given reasons for going to the playground in Prospect Park. Some of the children said that Prospect Park is an ideal place for social opportunities and fun.

*“Well. I guess the playground in the park because I have fun there, meet new kids there, too. I like playing on the swings.” (Maria)*

*“For fun and pleasure really. Except for school I go there because I have to go to school. But most of these places in the park I go to like have fun and just do something. And in the zoo I learn all about animals.” (Bill)*

Similarly, Moore (1990) found that “the locational relationship between playgrounds and parks was a clearly identified qualitative factor. Playgrounds (the second most frequent element in children’s drawings) were often shown located within parks (the third most frequent elements)” (p. 110). Moore believed that the ability for the children in his study to go on field trips to parks and the design quality of the playgrounds located in those parks afforded them the opportunity to hang out and socialize with friends.

*“Ice skating is usually because a friend invites me and it is pretty fun. I like to go to the [Prospect Park] zoo. I like this zoo because it is more open. There is a place where you can test how long you can jump and you can compare it to how far different animals can jump. I like the Brooklyn Library because you get what you want quickly. You can stay there and read. There is a place upstairs to eat. Like, you meet a lot of people there.” (Andres)*

The progressive approach in education, which frames place exploration as a pedagogical tool (see Chapter 2 for more detail about this approach), advocates the use of the environment as a fertile ground for connecting children’s learning in and outside of school. In this approach, teachers are encouraged to add an experiential component to children’s factual learning about different subjects such as science and geography through field trips into the urban environment. This process is believed to help transfer what they have learned in the school into everyday settings where they can explore, be

creative, and thus, develop deep understanding of complex concepts and social situations (Sprague Mitchell, 1971; Antler, 1987). Teachers from the schools participating in this study used Prospect Park as a science resource. On organized field trips, they went to the park with their students to explore and learn about the natural environment. Some of the children participating in this study who went on these field trips, were also required to develop science research projects on their own time by picking a topic and conducting their research in the park with the help of their parents.

*“On a class trip, we went to the pond, we had these little tubes, and you had to see what there was in the pond, it was pretty polluted. We found a lot of insects, and now we have like a whole bucket full of them. And in science, which we did, we had to look them up in the compound microscope and see what you could find.” He added: “We found a lot of living things. There were like these little creatures. They looked like bubbles, they moved so fast I could hardly find it. The microscope had like 300 power, and when we did the 300 we found little jellyfish, you could barely see it, it was shaped like a ladybug. It was pretty exciting.”*  
*(Ivan)*

*“I had to do an explorer project [in Prospect Park]. I had to explore some place in the park that I hadn’t been to for a long time. I was just acting like an explorer going to be the first person to go there and I*

*mapped my route and I wrote about what happened on the way and stuff.”*

*(John)*

Despite all its benefits to children, parents, and schools from the Park Slope neighborhood, it is important to recognize in a time of scarce resources that Prospect Park is one of the “flagship” parks in New York City, favored in terms of funding to the detriment of neighborhood parks and playgrounds (Katz, 2004). According to Katz (2004), these environmentally rich flagship parks, which include Central Park in Manhattan, Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx, and Flushing Meadows in Queens, are not being fully used for children’s independent place exploration. “Because of the large and growing concern for children’s physical and social safety in the public environment, most parents do not allow their children to visit these incredibly rich settings unaccompanied until adolescence at the very earliest” (Katz, 2004, p. 173). As I noted above and as Bill’s mother explains below, most of the children in my study (14 out of 18) were not allowed to go to Prospect Park alone.

*“I wouldn’t let him go to the park alone and I wouldn’t think any child should go through the park alone. It’s not that safe. I don’t think any children should go through the park alone. I mean, even if he’s with his brother, he wouldn’t go alone. I wouldn’t let them go in the park alone. I would always go with them.” (Bill’s mother)*

## Commercial places

Commercial places are centers of social, cultural and economic activities.

Besides providing access to everyday stuff, commercial places offered exploratory activities for children such as window shopping, making cost-comparisons, and coming into contact with diverse people and events (Moore 1990). In his study of children's exploration of the urban environment, Moore (1990) found that commercial places were also "places to hang out, to enjoy the scene and feel part of the community" (p. 201).

In Park Slope, most of the commercial establishments were located on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, which had heavy pedestrian and automobile traffic density. This is especially true for most of the independent explorers. Jan, one of the independent explorers in this study, said, "I have gone all the way up and down 7th Avenue from my school [on Prospect Avenue] to the subway station [on Flatbush Ave]." Most children and parents referred to these two avenues as constant destination places. For example, Lori's mother referred to Seventh Avenue as their "main drag." The children were very familiar with most of the commercial places located on these two avenues, and were always accompanied by friends/siblings and/or parents when they went there. As the children went also to these commercial places alone during school lunchtime and when walking to and from school, they engaged in some of the same exploratory activities found by Moore (1990), including window-shopping and making cost-comparisons by determining for example where they could afford to eat within the permitted area.

*"There is Pino's Pizza [on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Streets], which is like a place where all the kids in my school go for lunch when they go*

*out because it is just right across the street. It is pretty much the only place that is affordable to eat at in the range of where we are allowed to go. Well, it is only cheaper like at school times because they have it so that more kids will come to the store. It is still pretty cheap there. There is a candy store right across the street that is starting to get too expensive though. Because first they started off really cheap then they got a lot people to come and they raised the prices so now people don't like to go there much anymore but we still go there because they have these candies that we like. They are like little Lego candies, you fit them together.”*

*(Andres)*

Most of the commercial places (e.g., toy and play stores, candy stores, pizza places) targeted families with children. As a result, they tended to be community oriented and tailored their services to families by making their physical and social environment family- and child-friendly.

*“The neighborhood stores are kid-friendly. Besides a parade that they have for kids on Halloween, a lot of stores give out candy and little gifts just as a way of saying we care or we appreciate kids' business. There is a number of activities geared toward kids.... The readings in the bookstore are a good example.”* *(David's mother)*

*“The stores expect kids as customers... they can go shopping on the [7<sup>th</sup>] Avenue, they can go to the store, or different places and feel pretty comfortable, which is nice. They can shop, they can spend money, they can be grown up in that sense.” (Bradley’s mother)*

Most of the children were not required to buy anything to be in the stores, and as result used these commercial places as places to hang out, explore, and play. Some stores had pets for children to play with, employed staff friendly to children, had toys for children to play with for a minimal fee while their parents were shopping, were very much involved in the Park Slope Halloween parade, and participated in the Safe Haven program<sup>4</sup>, which allowed the children to come into their stores in case of emergency and use the telephone to call their parents. Children’s favorite commercial places provided some activities for play and exploration, and had friendly staff. For example, one of the children’s favorite restaurants had a big open window placed between the kitchen and the dining area, which allowed them to watch how the food was being prepared and ask questions. They provided children with pizza dough to play with, and showed them how to make a pizza.

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<sup>4</sup> The Safe Haven Program, a non-for-profit organization run by volunteer parents from public and private schools, deals with safety issues for children in different neighborhoods in the city. As a community-based initiative, it also relies on the participation of local merchants, who display a bright yellow sticker on their door as a demonstration of membership in the program and are thus recognized as children’s protectors in the community. To children who have to deal with street safety issues on their own, these stores constitute safe buffer zones within the neighborhood where children can get help, feel protected, and call the police.

*“I usually don’t buy things [at the Scouting Party store on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue] I just look at the toys and play with them. My mom buys me things sometimes. And there is a lot of musical things, and the store smells really nice.” (Andres)*

*“Fifth Avenue you have a lot of stores here. We walk along 5<sup>th</sup> Ave sometimes. We just went to Mike and Tony’s for dinner. It’s opposite Cuccina [restaurant], and at Aunt Suzie [café with a children’s playroom]. Barnes and Noble bookstore on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue between 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Street, that’s her favorite store.” (Tisha’s mother)*

These commercial establishments as child-friendly places contributed to children’s place exploration and development of a sense of place in Park Slope. Through the investment of their time and money, parents and children developed some degree of commitment and loyalty to these places, which support some of the main characteristics of a child-friendly place such as “promotes exploration and actualization of its many affordances for different activities and social interactions; ... allows children to express themselves freely in creation and control of territories ...” (Chatterjee, 2005, p. 17). Commercial places, which afforded these friendly qualities in Park Slope, were increasingly becoming children’s favorite places. Places to hang out with families and friends, these places offered children a greater sense of their community.

## **Friends' homes**

Friends' homes were popular places to visit for the 10-year-children in my study. Researchers have found that families, friends and their homes were integral parts of children's environmental exploration and often their favorite places, especially among adolescents. These different social and environmental elements contribute to children's and adolescents' sense of belonging to a larger community and expanded spatial range at the same time, and thus enhance their self-esteem and self-control, as well as environmental, cultural and social competence through safe and independent exploration of places and people in the local environment (Chatterjee, 2005; Hart, 1979; Morrow, 2001; Keller, 1998; Moore, 1990; Rubin, 1980; Pine, 1973; Wridt, 2004).

In my research, access to a network of friends and family friends was a key factor in children's place exploration in Park Slope because it provided them opportunities to increase their spatial range and visit new places. Through these means children participated in a range of activities such as playing videogames, and socializing with their friends and their friends' families. Some children, who had a lot of friends on their block like George, Maria, Tony, and Andres, and whose parents were easy going about their children visiting each other, went to their friends' homes on a daily basis without any formal pre-arrangement for play-dates. This afforded them more flexibility and frequency of interaction with their friends. Other children, who did not have friends living near them like Terri, Ivan, and Elga, or had friends living near them but were not allowed to go to their friends' houses without formal play-date arrangements like Lori, Tisha, and Bradley, visited their friends less frequently, and did not benefit much from

the sense of freedom to explore that some of the children reported having when visiting with friends.

*“I did different things depending on who it is. With him [pointing to one friend’s house on the map], I usually first do my homework and then watch TV or play computer games. And with him [pointing to another friend’s house on the map] I usually do my homework and then play war games or sometimes computer. And when I go here [pointing to another friend’s house on the map], sometimes I go on bike rides with her and her mom and sometimes around the park. Sometimes I just play like board games or watch TV. There [pointing to another friend’s house on the map] ... a lot of times we play with Lego’s or sometimes when I go over on Saturday nights we watch movies. Sometimes there [pointing to another friend’s house on map] I play with wooden blocks and little toy people and sometimes we make movies. They have a video camera. When I go to my friends around here [pointing to the last friend’s house on the map], usually I play like tag games and stuff because there is a lot of people that live around there so we all gather and play tag like on the side walks.” (John)*

*“We play Super Nintendo and we play board games and we play with our babysitter’s baby. We really like to spy and stuff. We like to spy on my friend’s mom or sister. He [his friend] has walkie-talkies. He goes*

*downstairs. When his sister and her friends are like downstairs. We follow them and our friend stays back at the house and coordinates it all by the walkie-talkie because the walkie-talkie can go for ten blocks. We usually, like they think they hear something and so they look back and we have to dodge behind trees or behind houses or sometimes under cars.”*

*(Tom)*

*“We play computer games at my friend’s house. He has a ping-pong table in his basement and a pool table and we play that. We play with his cat.”*

*(Andres)*

Friends’ houses afforded some of the children the opportunity to engage in activities such as playing video games and watching TV for long hours, or seeing certain movies, which they would otherwise not engage in if they were at home because of their families’ ‘home rules.’ Friends’ houses like schools were used as transitional places by children to not only engage in parental censored activities but to also explore new places in the city.

*“She was invited to a friend’s house. We knew she was going to a movie. That was fine. We didn’t bother to ask them what movie. And after she went to the movie we found out what movie she had been to and we were not happy. It was full of every single thing you don’t really want your child to go witness” (Terri’s mother).*

*“She will play with her friend downstairs a lot. And I think that they actually are less strict than we are so she can do things down there that she can’t do up here. Like tear around and screaming and make noise and stuff. And, you know, if they can handle that, that’s fine. That’s their house” (Tisha’s mother)*

### **Adult over-supervision and its consequences**

Adults accompanied most children to the parks and playgrounds, commercial places, and residential places in Park Slope because of safety concerns for children. These concerns were physical as well social. Children’s exploration of these places in Park Slope from their homes and schools required the constant negotiation of streets and avenues, many with heavy traffic, and dealing with parents’ concerns about crime and other dangers. Other factors included the child’s physical size, gender, and parents’ feelings of safety in and familiarity with certain areas of the neighborhood such as Prospect Park. This was the frequent explanation provided by both parents and children. As Nina explained, she always went to the Brooklyn Public Library, less than 3 blocks away from her house, with an adult because of the heavy traffic around Grand Army Plaza: “I go there with my mom because of traffic. Although I don’t go there very often.” Her mother added: “She’s never walked to the library by herself or with her friends.” In response to one of my questions, another parent, who lived a few blocks away from Prospect Park said, “No. No biking, no walking, no. Not with my daughter.

No. It's not safe. It's not safe. You probably noticed she's small. She's small and she's a girl." (Tisha's mother) Further, they perceived some of the distant places in the neighborhood as unsafe, including Prospect Park, even for walking if their child was with an adult. As a result, their children were heavily supervised place explorers with limited territorial range in the neighborhood.

Further, with this level of supervision by adults, and the detailed safety strategies they required for every trip outside the houses, some of the children, characterized as being 'indoor children' by their parents, did not often ask spontaneously to go outside of their homes. Elga explained her preference for supervised exploration in the following way: "I usually like to hang around with my friends. One thing I like to do is stay around with my family at home and do things together. I don't like anywhere alone because I usually have more fun with people around my age, and adults. But mostly adults because they usually know more and they can teach me different things about it." They were used to the idea that every trip outside their homes needed to be planned and organized in advance, that they needed to be accompanied to visit the same places, which they have done so many times that they were getting bored of them. According to parents, these children often chose to stay home to hang out with their families, play games, read, watch TV, or have play-dates with their friends (see Table 7).

Table 7: Children's place preferences: Indoor or/and outdoor

Indoor/outdoor preferences	Girls (n=8)	Boys (n=10)	Total
Indoor (n=7)	5	2	7
Outdoor (n=5)	1	4	5
Both (n=6)	2	4	6

As her mother said, “Nina is a very focused kid and she likes a lot of solitary pursuits. She loves artwork. She loves to draw. She loves to read. She just consumes books like you can’t believe.” This was especially true for girls (see Table 7), who developed great interest in and a love for books, engaged in imaginative explorations through enactments of the active creation of fictional worlds and characters, and were curious about human relations within the context of neighbors and friends.

*“I think it’s a function of the city that there isn’t that much to do outside and so to just, you know, what is it, you know, like I want to say “Do you want to walk with me to the store?” She doesn’t really like to walk around much. Her favorite activities are reading, and songs. She has a song sheet that she’s forever making. She sews clothes together. She makes clothes for herself and her dolls. She’s always reading books. She reads a lot. She really loves novels. When her friends come here, they stay up in her room and they play with stuff, you know, dolls and toys and stuff.” (Roberta’s father)*

It is hard to determine how much of these children's preferences for staying in indoor environments and engaging in solitary pursuits was their 'choice' and how much of it was their parents' channeling them to such 'choices.'

## **Exploration of Places Beyond Park Slope**

As stated in Chapter Two, cities are rich laboratories for learning; to be able to tap into them is critical for children's social and intellectual development. Cities offer opportunities for children's exploration of complex and diverse physical and social environments. At the same time, they challenge parents, who are often worried about their children's safety. Both situations were well recognized by parents and school staff because the children were commonly taken to educational institutions such as museums, aquaria, and zoos, and perhaps not surprisingly, were much more closely supervised in their exploration of the broader urban environment than in their neighborhood. Children's travels to places beyond their neighborhood were perceived by parents and school staff to be mainly educational, and thus, hoped to have life-changing qualities on children's social, intellectual and physical development. In addition to educational institutions, children were commonly taken to commercial places in the city, such as restaurants, theaters, and malls.<sup>5</sup>

Adults (parents or school staff) did most of the planning for these trips in terms of places to visit, time, types of escort, and modes of transportation. They had thereby

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<sup>5</sup> We need to recognize that there is some overlap between the major place categories (e.g., educational institutions, landmark places, commercial places) and their subcategories (theaters, cemeteries, gardens) that I use in this section of the dissertation. These distinctions are not to be taken as absolutes.

pretty much total control of children's place exploration in the city. As Nina's mother said, "Most of the places I would say in New York City that she knows about are places that we've introduced her to. So, she's learned about places that way ...." Children's exploration of the larger city, then was the least independent aspect of their environmental exploration. These journeys were pretty much controlled and shaped by adults, who felt that the children needed much more environmental and social support in the complex broader urban environment than in Park Slope. However, children's interests and preferences for places outside Park Slope were taken into account by their parents, and were accommodated on family organized trips.

Children's exploration of places beyond their neighborhood was primarily focused on Brooklyn and Manhattan, with relatively few excursions in Staten Island, Queens and the Bronx. In Brooklyn and Manhattan, the children often visited a range of places, including educational places (e.g., aquaria, zoos, gardens, parks), commercial places (e.g., malls, amusement parks and centers, theaters, movie-theaters, shops), parks and other open spaces (e.g., gardens and public parks), and landmark places (e.g., Empire State Building, World Trade Center, Greenwood Cemetery).

*"I'd say most of the time if we're not in Brooklyn we're in Manhattan, in terms of New York City. Unfortunately we do not go to other boroughs as much as I'd like to." (Bradley's mother)*

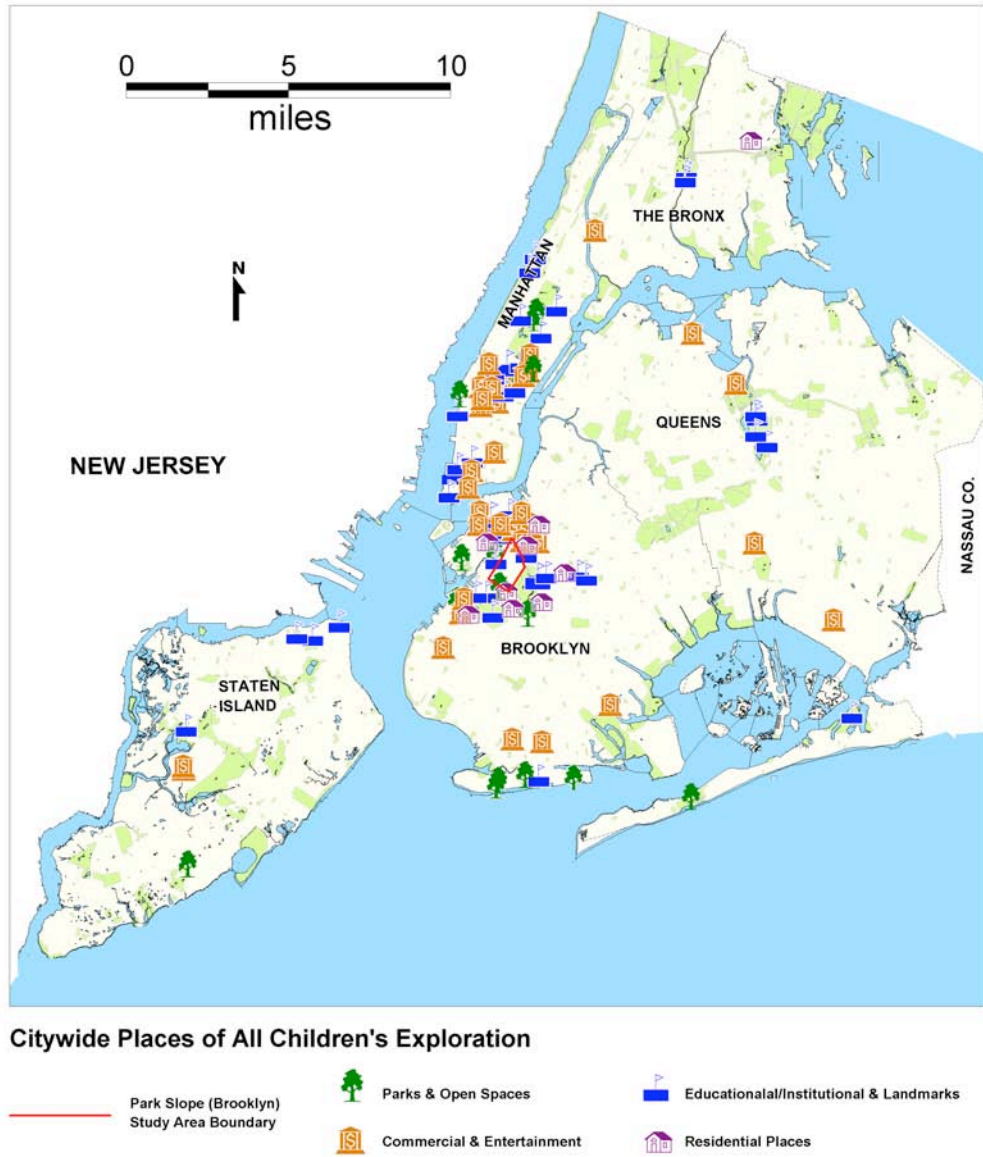
*"We go mostly Brooklyn and Manhattan, very rarely do we go to other boroughs. I know Manhattan pretty well so if I want to take my kids*

*someplace I know how to get there. I can just go. Andres plays soccer at Packard School [Brooklyn Heights neighborhood] in the winter and at the Parade Grounds in the Fall and Spring. We go to the beach a lot in the summer, Coney Island, Brighton Beach, Riis Park....” (Andres’ mother)*

*“All the major museums. Tony and his brother have been to the Broadway Theater district, ... South Street Seaport, ... the Bronx Zoo, ... Shea Stadium, ... LaGuardia, Kennedy [Airport]. We have friends who live out around Manhattan Beach, Coney Island. We haven’t visited Staten Island.” (Tony’s father)*

Most of the children went only to educational places (Children’s Museum, the Staten Island Zoo, the historical village at the Richmond Town Restoration, and the Blue Heron Pond Park) in Staten Island. Children explored fewer places in Queens and the Bronx. In Queens, the most common places visited were the New York Hall of Science and Shea Stadium. In the Bronx, the children went only to Yankee Stadium and the Bronx Zoo. These trips to the city were not surprisingly skewed by borough. For some families these trips were much less frequent, many tended to take their children to the same places over and over again.

Figure 16: Children's Exploration of Places in the City



The unevenness of children's place exploration in the city can be explained by the obvious facts that Park Slope residents had much easier ways to access most places in Brooklyn and Manhattan, and as it is well known, Manhattan is the center of New York in terms of the number and quality of its attractions and events, architecture, entertainment places, parks, and educational institutions. Furthermore, most parents recognized that they could not or did not seek to familiarize their children with *all* the boroughs' geographies and events for a variety of interrelated reasons, including (1) parents' familiarity with and perceptions of certain boroughs, (2) busy parents and over-scheduled children, (3) children's transitional place preferences, (4) cost of accessing the city, and (5) parents' search for ways to help their children develop a strong sense of place in a historically rich city like New York. Therefore, they concentrated on few places to visit with their children rather than go to a lot of places.

### **Familiarity with and perceptions of certain boroughs**

There was a strong link between 10-year-old children's place exploration, and parents' lack of familiarity with and perceptions of certain areas of the broader environment for exploration. Some children (8) reported that they never visited places in at least one of the boroughs: Queens (2 boys) and Staten Island (5 girls and 1 boy), and expressed disliking them because of either their own experiences or their parents' and others' negative perceptions of these places. These negative perceptions explained why some children did not visit or had limited visits to certain boroughs.

*“Well, I usually get dragged there [Queens] by my Mom and my Dad. They say I have to come to see like uncles or cousins I’ve never met. We never stop in Staten Island because it stinks there. It’s a dump.” (Tony)*

*“... I don’t keep track of Staten Island. I’ve been to Queens. I don’t like Queens very much. Well, I was with my Dad and we were just driving through. We stopped for a few minutes. But it is like nothing is really happening there.” (Andres)*

*“I wish they would secede already. I don’t think I’ve ever taken them to Staten Island. The truth is because partly I don’t know what is going on Queens. It is rare that I hear of an event and also the transportation is not easy. To get to Queens you either have to drive or you have to take the G Train, which is like a mess. I don’t know the area well so it is hard for me to get around.” (Andres’ mother)*

### **Children’s transitional place preferences**

Some parents indicated that their children’s interests in exploring places in the city were gradually shifting away from parental control. Parents felt that they dictated more where the family went in the city when their children were younger, but this started to change as their children reached middle childhood.

*“Often it’s things like, well she used to suggest the aquarium. As she gets older, she doesn’t suggest that so much anymore. She wants me to take her shopping on Saturdays. This is something new. This is a new interest in clothing and fashion. But she’s also asked about going to see shows, ....” (Lori’s mother)*

*“It was easier when my son was preschool age and I was the one choosing where we were going to go. There was not a lot of opposition ... Now, we have to pull him around, we have to force him. We used to go to the Children’s Museum, the Brooklyn Museum. That really stopped like after about age 7-8 at tops.” (Tom’s mother)*

The decision to explore places was increasingly based on children’s expressed curiosity about specific places and their place preferences. The types of places that these children requested to go to were becoming more varied, and tended to veer away from educational settings like museums and zoos (parents’ preferred places) to more fun places like arcades, sports arenas, and video game stores and other digital technology places like the Sony building. The children reported that these places afforded them social interaction with peers, hands-on activities, learning about things of interest to them, and thus provided them with a lot of fun. As Bill said, “[At] ... Sony technologies, they have a place where you can invent your own video game. ... There’s a video game tester. It’s to see if they can beat your game. You use your imagination really. I want to go there

more often.” Many of them talked about how much they enjoyed the New York City public transportation system such as subways and the Staten Island ferry.

*“At the Metropolitan Museum Art, I learned about 17<sup>th</sup> Century clothes during my last visit. It’s my favorite museum because instead of just like painting and stuff, they have all different kinds of art like they have clothes and people, and photographs.” (Terri)*

Although parents rarely mentioned these places when they recounted their children’s place preferences, they encouraged their children to tell them where they wanted to go in the city. The fact that they were given the opportunity to express their place interests did not mean that they were always taken to them. The feasibility of their requests should be understood in the context of other family commitments and activities, and parental perceptions of the suggested areas. The other way this process works was children’s refusal to go to places suggested by parents, which tended to be educational institutions. Whether they went to the places of interest to them or not, I believe that by just expressing where they would like to go and what they would like to do in the city and sharing their interests with parents, the children were gradually developing a sense of what they wanted to do in the city, and affirming their urban place identities.

## **Busy parents and over-scheduled children in a self-sufficient neighborhood**

It is well established by now that children and parents in northern industrial countries have busy lives (e.g., Fotel & Thomsen, 2004; Schor, 2005; Zeiher, 2003 & 2001). According to Schor (2005), parents in the United States are working more hours to support their families, and as a result, their ability to spend leisure time with their children has been undermined by economic pressures. “Between 1979 and 2000 the average married couple aged 25-54 with children added 388 hours of work to their annual schedule” (Schor, 2005, p. 16). Children have busy schedules during their ‘leisure’ time inside the home (e.g., chores, schoolwork, etc.; see Chapter 7 for further details about their indoor activities and family rules) and in the outside environment (Fotel & Thomsen, 2004; Zeiher, 2003 & 2001).

*[Children’s] daily life in the western world is increasing institutionalized; they have lots of activities and often a tight schedule to attend during their day. The process of insularization is especially apparent in the case of children living in differentiated urban environments, where activities for children are not in the immediate surrounding of the home, but scattered all over the city. ... They have to plan their days in exact detail; who they want to play with and which activities they would like to attend (Fotel & Thomsen, 2004, p. 541).*

Contemporary western childhood is heavily programmed by a range of after-school and weekend activities such as organized sports, art classes, birthday parties (often at commercial places), and play dates. Arranging these activities consumes a tremendous amount of time on the part of parents, most of whom already have full-time jobs and long work hours (Schor, 2005). Similarly, most of the parents in my study (n=33), who held

full-time jobs and had at least two children to raise, recognized how hard it was to manage their own personal lives, professional lives, and their children's activities. Based on my casual conversation and informal observations, some of the parents indicated that they have to maintain a very sophisticated and detailed weekly schedule for all family members.

In my research parents indicated that accessing other boroughs and even other parts of Brooklyn required a lot of planning time, and then were themselves time-consuming especially for those who had to rely on public transportation. As Andres' mother said, "If I want to take them someplace in Queens, I have to find out and figure it out. It takes more time." Such excursions were often logistically complicated or required costly childcare arrangements. Much of the parents' weekends were spent running errands and taking their children to organized sports, religious classes, art and music classes, birthday parties, play dates, parks or playgrounds around the neighborhood. Because of the demands on their time, some of the parents acknowledged that they did not rush to take their children to places outside of Brooklyn unless it was necessary. That meant such things as accompanying their children on school trips, visiting relatives and friends from out of town, obliging their children's incessant requests to take them to specific places were often too big a burden to take on. They believed that Park Slope and its surrounding neighborhoods had most of the resources needed for their children's place exploration, including places such as the zoo, parks and playgrounds, museums, the botanical garden, and various commercial venues. Tisha's mother explained this best when she said, "We don't really go to places outside Park Slope. As a matter of fact, we don't often go to the city because our neighborhood is so self-sufficient that we don't

really have to go to Manhattan. I work at home, and since they're with me, then they don't go to the city much either. My husband and I are tired." (Tisha's mother)

Most of the children had busy lives in Brooklyn. Their parents kept them busy through schoolwork, as well as other activities such as participation in after-school programs, and organized sports. The children relaxed by watching TV, going to the movies, or playing computer and video games.

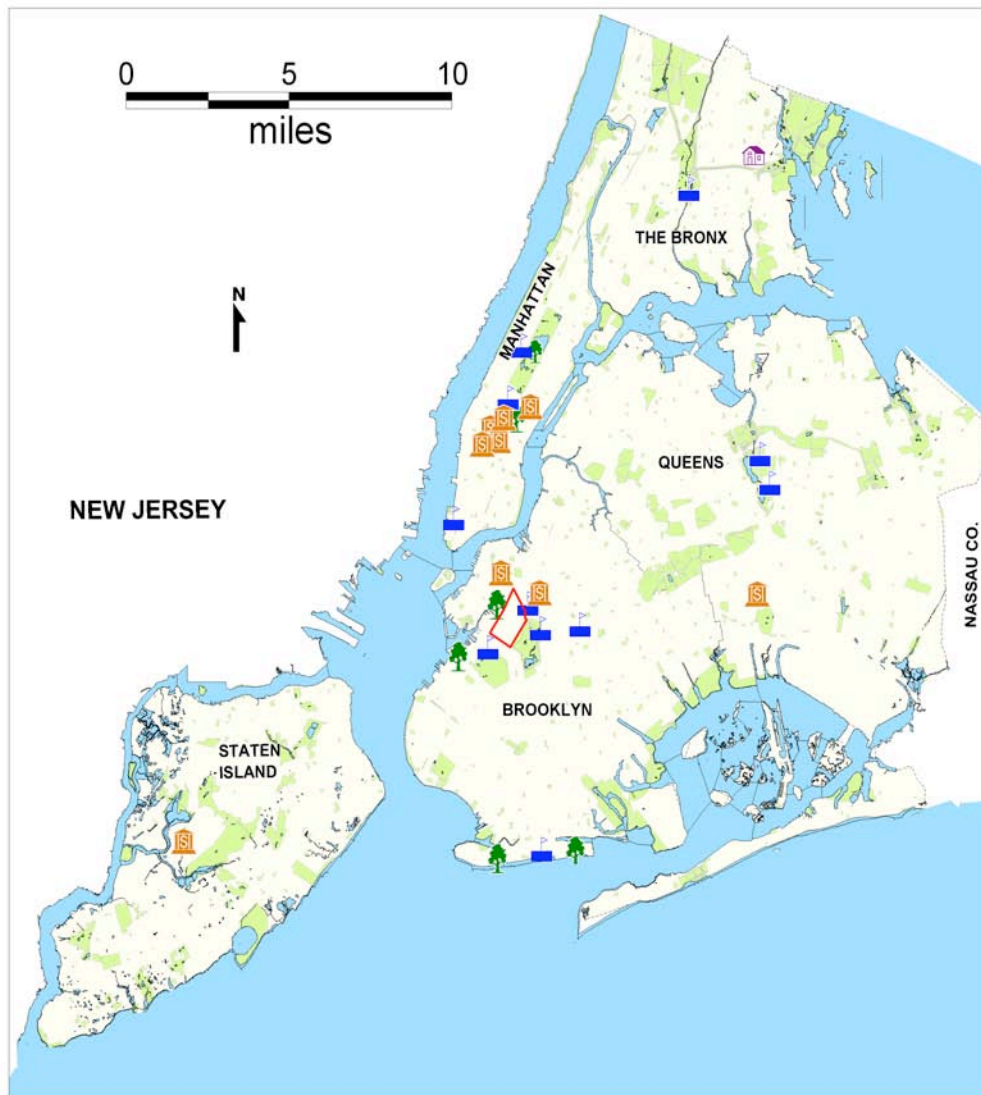
*"Tuesdays they come home. Wednesdays Nina goes to Hebrew school, but she comes home first. She walks there by herself across the street. Thursday they come home and the piano teacher comes here. Fridays they go to, she goes to dance class at four-thirty. She comes home first, actually I pick her up on Fridays because our babysitter is picking up our younger one, taking her to her dance class, which is an hour earlier, and Nina goes to her dance class at four-thirty. Our babysitter walks her over there and I usually pick her up at five-thirty. And that's her schedule for the week. Saturdays are free. That's family day. Sundays she goes to Sunday School in the morning and recently she started this art class in the afternoon, which we drive her to. Yes, she's a busy kid."* (Nina's mother)

*"I mean, I don't think we take advantage of it [the city] as much as we could. ... We just spend the weekend doing the laundry and doing the grocery shopping and she plays with her friend and that's the end of it."*  
(Terri's mother)

## **Financial cost of accessing the city**

Although the focus of recent studies is increasingly on the commercialization of children's play-space (McKendrick et al., 2000; McKendrick et al., 1999 & 1998), little attention has been paid to the financial cost associated with children's exploration of traditional sites for outings such as museums or zoos, transportation costs for families to go places together, and other costs that make family outings expensive, such as babysitting services and ticket prices. In this research, the cost of accessing places and events was a key reason for children's imbalanced and infrequent forays into the city boroughs, and permeated all the other reasons advanced above by parents. Cost was a major issue and was reflected in the unequal access of working and upper middle class parents to the broader urban environment. As a result, there was a clear difference between upper middle class and working class children's place exploration (see Figure 17 & 18). The wealthier children explored more city places than the working class children. Most middle and upper middle class children's exploration of the city were somewhat similar (see Figure 18 & 19).

Figure 17: Citywide Places of Working Class Children



**Citywide Places of Working Class Children's Exploration**

-  Park Slope (Brooklyn) Study Area Boundary
-  Parks & Open Spaces

 Commercial & Entertainment
-  Educational/Institutional & Landmarks

 Residential Places

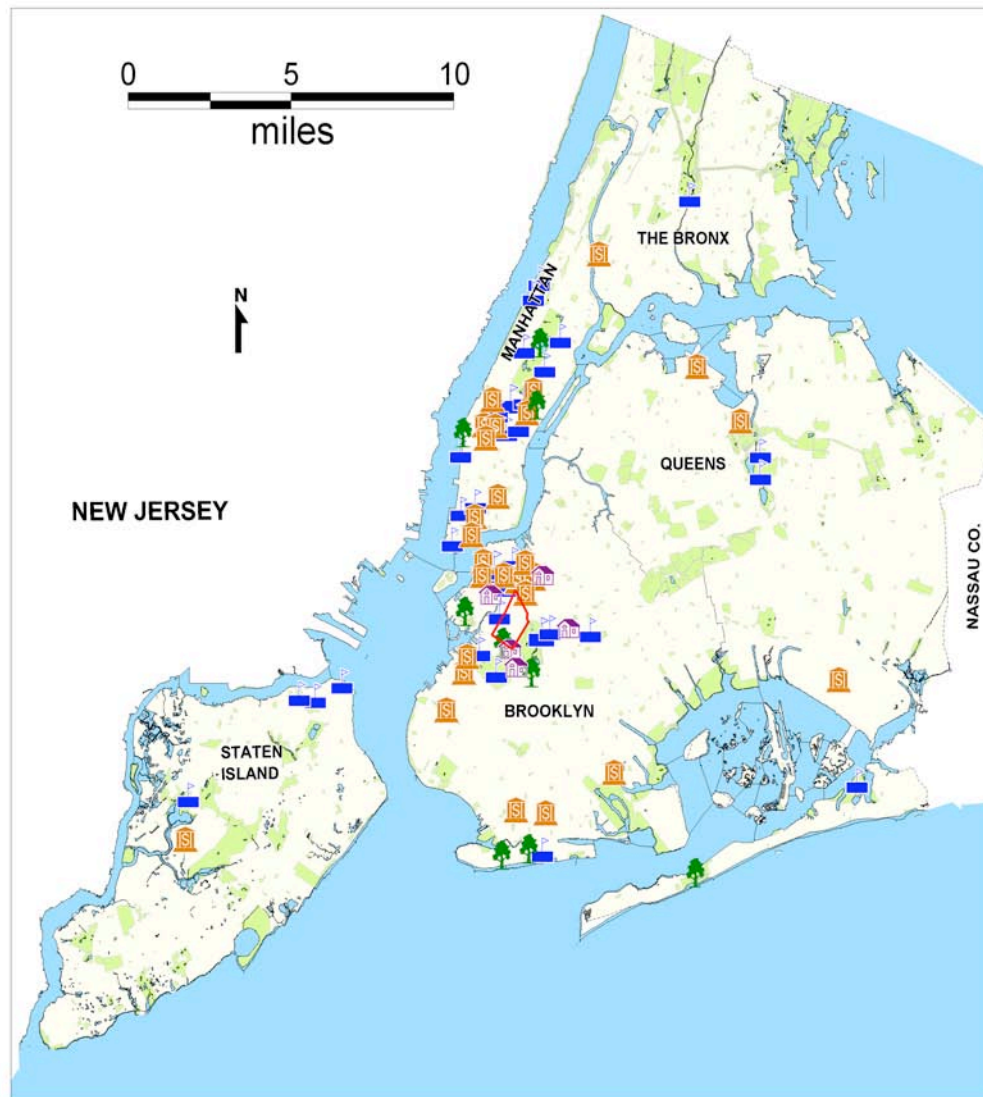
Figure 18: Citywide Places of Upper Middle Class Children



**Citywide Places of Upper Class Children's Exploration**

- Park Slope (Brooklyn) Study Area Boundary
- Parks & Open Spaces
- Educational/Institutional & Landmarks
- Commercial & Entertainment
- Residential Places

Figure 19: Citywide Places of Middle Class Children



#### Citywide Places of Middle Class Children's Exploration



The upper middle class children often went to a range of educational and commercial places in Manhattan. They had access to places such as parents' offices, friends and relatives living in Manhattan, and thus, were able to expand their place exploration in that borough more so than the working class families. Further, Manhattan

was much less of a financial burden for wealthier families, and as a result they were able to accommodate their children's place preferences more easily than less well off families. Privileged children were taken to places in Manhattan such as Broadway shows, the Metropolitan Opera, hockey and basketball games, concerts and the circus at Madison Square Garden, and museums, which were expensive to access for many families. Some of these children were also taken to baseball games. Further, the privileged children exhibited a much more detailed familiarity with places in the larger urban environment than the children from less well-off families.

*"I have been to Madison Square Garden to see hockey games, the Met [opera house], the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Natural History Museum, World Trade Center, Empire State Building, my father's office, my mother's office, the fire station museum, Broadway musicals, Shea Stadium, Yankee Stadium, and the Bronx zoo." (David)*

*"I've been to BAM, all the museums, all the gardens, and all the parks. I've been to a lot of restaurants, there's one on Fulton Street, there's one right across the street from where my brother goes to school [St Anne's in Brooklyn Heights]. I've been to Broadway and good restaurants. I've been to the Metropolitan, the Museum of Natural History, the Museum of the Native American, Rockefeller Center, South Street Seaport, movies, TV shows at film centers, Guggenheim, Central Park, and the Met. Uh, the Museum of Modern Art and that's about it. I've been to FAO Schwartz,*

*I've been to my dad's office. Well, my dad has an office a couple of blocks away, and one subway ride away from Central Park." (Bradley)*

Working class parents told me that the cost of entry to events, transportation, and other incidentals was a reason for their not taking their children out into the city. This situation was more challenging for families with more than one child in the household (see Table 8) who had limited access to babysitters, did not have a lot of time to spend with their children, and had to rely on public transportation to get to places in the city.

Table 8: Class by average number of siblings<sup>4</sup>

<b>Class</b>	<b>Average number of sibling</b>
Working class (n=3)	3.6
Upper middle class (10)	1.2
Middle class (5)	1

As a result, most of the children from less well-off families went to fewer places beyond the neighborhood than the upper middle and middle class children (see Figure 17, 18 & 19). When they went to educational places outside the neighborhood they were commonly taken through the school. In addition to these school trips, these children also went to distant commercial places such as stores and restaurants with their parents and relatives. Although they recognized that they did not go to many diverse places beyond

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<sup>4</sup> The concepts of class I am using in this table are defined in Chapter 3.

Park Slope, they expressed a sense of familiarity with the city based on their own experiences.

*“I have been to Manhattan with my aunt and her two sons .... I’ve been to the Fulton Mall [in Brooklyn]. I’ve been to the waterfront [in Red Hook] with my Mom and sisters. [I can see] ... the South Street Seaport [as seen from Brooklyn]. It’s like under the bridges [Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridge].” (Elga)*

*“I visit my brother’s house in Staten Island during the holidays. ... I go shopping at Macy’s and Toys-R-Us [in Manhattan] with my aunts and parents, and go to Hispanic restaurants. I have been to the Museum of Science [in Queens], and aquarium [in Coney Island) with my class. ... I mostly don’t go out [into the city], you know. I mostly stay more in the neighborhood.” (Maria)*

### **Promotion of place identity and attachment**

Going to places is one thing, and promoting children’s place identity and attachment through exploration is another. Children are exposed to the history of certain key places in the city such as Greenwood Cemetery, Empire State Building, and Statue of Liberty. Through this exposure parents expressed the need to share with their children the historical richness of places in New York City, and thus to foster a strong sense of

place in their children. The latter is related to such concepts as place attachment and identity, and involves broad affective and cognitive activities related to specific or types of places and to relationships among places (Weinstein & David, 1987). Crucial to the formation of place identity is the sense of place and place “belongingness,” which allow the child to negotiate the physical environment in meaningful ways.

*“Place identity is a substructure of the self-identity of the person consisting of, broadly conceived, cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives. These cognitions represent memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behavior and experience, which relate to the variety and complexity of physical settings that define the day-to-day existence of every human being. At the core of such physical environment-related cognitions is the ‘environmental past’ of the person; a past consisting of places, spaces and their properties which have served instrumentally in the satisfaction of the person’s biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs.”*  
(Proshansky et al., 1995, p. 89)

A few parents participating in this study felt the need to impart to their children a strong sense of place attachment and identity through historical place appreciation and exploration. These parents, all New York City natives, focused on the qualitative long term and broad approach to the formation of place identity and attachment for the sake of helping their children learn about the history of certain key places in the city (e.g., Greenwood Cemetery, Empire State Building, Statue of Liberty, Coney Island). They were driven by the fact that it was their intention to impart to their children a strong sense of what it means to be a New Yorker by introducing them to the city as a historical place, and a great place to live and raise families. Their goal was not about going to as many places as possible in the city per se, but rather about fostering the qualitative formation of a specific type of urban identity in their children through specific teaching about how to

negotiate city challenges such as safety, and the sharing and appreciation of the geographical history of New York City. This generational approach to place exploration was designed to help their children appreciate the quality of places, and history of different landmarks in the city.

*“One thing that’s interesting about this site [the new Atlantic Center Mall] that I was explaining to him [his son] is this was where Ebbets Field was supposed to be relocated if the Dodgers were to stay in Brooklyn. ... I have taken him on two occasions to visit Greenwood Cemetery to show him the architecture in the graves and just to basically give him a sense of a very pretty old place in New York City.” (David’s mother)*

*“I think I’ve taken them everywhere in the city because I want them to know the places in the city. Let them to be able to take their children when they get older. I want them to learn about places that they probably wouldn’t go to like the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, Coney Island, and Greenwood Cemetery. Historical things like that. Because normally they wouldn’t go.” (Bill’s mother)*

Related to promoting children’s development of place identity and attachment through exploration of historical places is the notion of helping children be competent urban ‘street literate.’ Some of the parents believed that the acquisition of such skills

could help their children reduce their anxiety about the challenges of negotiating the urban environment and grow to be competent urban dwellers. This is how Andres's mother who is a native New Yorker explained the process:

*“There is something else that is really unconscious thing, most people who grow up here just develop it as a matter of, like breathing, you develop a certain way of walking, of holding your body whether having an expression on your face or not. If you have a certain look on your face and a certain way you are walking like you know where you are going and you just have an attitude. People can smell it. It works. It makes me happy to share the city and ways of being in the city with them [her children].”*

As other researchers have found, children are spending more time in indoor environments, including commercialized play-spaces, and home settings (Hart, 2002; Katz, 2004 & 1998; McKendrick et al., 2000; McNeal, 1992; Nevarez de Jesus, 1999; Valentine et al., 2000; Wridt, 2004). They are restricted in their possibilities to explore the urban environment independently because of many factors, including family circumstances, children's individual personalities and abilities, and parents' perceptions of the urban environment as a place to raise their children, and larger economic and political factors such as the increasing public disinvestment in children's developmental needs to have access to rich play resources in open spaces of the city. To better understand the broader context influencing children's restricted exploration of the urban

environment, it is crucial to know how the people who spend the most time with these children feel about Park Slope and the city as places to bring up children. These issues are examined in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER SIX PARENTS' PLACE PERCEPTIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR CHILDREN'S EXPLORATION

*Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. ... You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. (Gibran, 1971, p. 17)*

Large urban centers like New York City offer social, cultural, economic, and political diversity, as well as other qualities such as different types of built forms and natural environments, anonymity, novelty, and 'strangeness' (Proshansky, 1978; Holcomb, 1977). At the same time, city dwellers, especially children, confront the problem of unmet needs for independent access to the outdoor environment (Bartlett, 2002; Chawla, 2002; Hart, 2002; Katz, 2004). Thus, the urban environment can be a tremendous source of place knowledge and exploration, at the same time as it may provoke social isolation for children and their families (e.g., Bartlett et al., 1999; Chawla, 2002; Gaster, 1991 & 1992; Goerlitz et al., 1998; Hart, 1986; Katz, 2004, 1998 & 1994; Moore, 1986). This ambivalent nature of urban affordances for children's exploration was reflected in the parents' perceptions of the city and their neighborhood in my study.

Although parents' perceptions of New York City and Park Slope differed along many environmental and social dimensions such as class and parents' places of upbringing, there were overlaps among parents' views. Parents referred to the social, economic and environmental challenges that they had to deal with daily in order to raise their children in such a rich urban environment, and discussed a number of positive social and environmental characteristics of the city, which they perceived to have played a role in the ways that they were bringing up their children. Overall, the city and neighborhood

were talked about in terms of benefits and drawbacks. While Park Slope was perceived as safer and more manageable, the city was perceived as more distant, unsafe, complex and challenging for both children and parents. This is understandable because of parents' intimate knowledge of their small-scale neighborhood environment. Parents perceived both environments as having rich resources for children's place exploration. As a result, most parents indicated a preference for bringing up their children in an urban setting as compared to rural and suburban environments.

*“When I think about living in the suburbs, I think about ... everybody in school looking the same. I like the fact that they're all kind of people, ... a lot of services for families [in Park Slope]. ... The fact that she lives in New York City means that she meets a real mix of people all the time, which is good, and we like that.” (Terri's mother)*

*“... I think my kids are really getting something that I didn't get when I was growing up in the suburbs, which is real. They're learning tolerance for all kinds of people, I think they really understand much more about the diversity of the world than I did growing up.” (Nina's mother)*

These perceptions of the urban environment inform the everyday structuring, support, and limitation of children's place exploration in the city. As I stated above, understanding children's exploration of the urban environment from parents' perspectives requires taking into account two major factors: (1) the wealth of socio-cultural, economic,

and environmental diversity, and (2) the challenges of accessing urban environments for children. While parents gave similar weight to the positive and negative aspects of living in Park Slope and in New York City, they were much more specific about the elements of the social and physical environment contributing to negative experiences. Positive elements fell generally under the category of diversity and wealth of resources, while negatives fell into several discrete categories such as the financial cost of accessing the city, safety issues, and consequences of gentrification on children's place exploration. In addition, parents' perceptions inform the strategies they deploy to help their children become independent explorers of places through the monitoring of their children's whereabouts and development of the skills necessary to go places safely alone in New York City in the mid-1990s.

## **Diverse and Stimulating Urban Environments**

Parents generally perceived New York City and Park Slope as socially, culturally, economically diverse and stimulating places. As an advantage for raising their children, they talked about the many rich resources and affordances that the city and their neighborhood had to offer, and the proximity and convenience of these resources to their homes was what made the urban environment a special place to live in and raise their children. New York City and Park Slope were perceived as having a rich reservoir of ethnic and cultural, economic, educational, and commercial diversity such as museums, parks, theaters, libraries, and diverse people in terms of ethnicity and race, sexual orientation, economic background and condition, and cultural and religious background. Some of them mentioned proximity and quality of the elementary schools in the

neighborhood. Their children had access to a diverse portfolio of after-school programs offered in and outside of the schools. Some of the parents moved into the neighborhood for the quality of its formal and informal education programs. Others talked about such cultural resources as the Brooklyn Botanical Garden, the Brooklyn Museum, the Brooklyn Library, the zoo, the Conservatory of Music, and after-school classes. Tony's father said, "We can literally walk for 10 to 15 minutes and be in the park. The zoo is terrific. The Botanical Gardens is very, very nice." Some of the parents mentioned that they liked having Prospect Park nearby and some talked about other recreational resources, including the YMCA, schoolyards, and summer day camps. Commercial resources were also mentioned, such as easy access to stores, movie theaters, restaurants, and malls. "For city living, I don't think you can beat it. It's very convenient in terms of all the different stores .... We have all different kinds of food, all different kinds of restaurants," enthused Tisha's mother. All the parents liked that they could walk to most places they needed to go and that the subway was nearby for those places they couldn't reach on foot. In addition, the affordances of these urban resources help them expose their children to different lifestyles, such as those of gays or different ethnic groups, challenging living conditions (e.g., homeless people), and cultures from around the world manifested in their accoutrements, religious holidays and landmarks (e.g., mosques, ethnic restaurants and stores).

*"I was on Court Street walking from here to the garage where I park my car, and on the same block I saw a Sikh in the white turban with his dagger, a Hari Krishna, a couple of people in traditional African garb,*

*obviously a couple of Hispanic people, and however many white people. And it was one block. That is New York, it is wonderful.” [Roberta’s father]*

*“It’s heterogeneity .... Park Slope is a major cluster area for gay people, homosexual men and women. It gives kids an opportunity to see such people as people rather than hear about them in some frightening and mysterious way. I’m pleased that it is that kind of neighborhood ....”*  
*(George’s father)*

Another quality of New York City and Park Slope that parents perceived to be critical to their children’s place exploration was their stimulating and creative ambiance. The urban environment seemed to be a theatrical platform, a canvas, where people felt free to express and be themselves through their desires and imagination. They marveled at the ingenuity of these urban dwellers’ abilities to act out the ways they really feel, and felt this was an asset for their children’s identity development. These perceptions were primarily focused on Manhattan as the heartbeat of the city. Lori’s mother shared her excitement while traveling to places within the city: “We get out the subway map together, and chart our course.... It’s exciting.... It’s like a whole new world out there.... And we make forays. I feel like it’s like, a little scary, but many wonderful things await .... To go to a ballgame, to go to a museum, to go to Chelsea Piers, the kids love that area.” Travels to Manhattan afforded exposure of children to a range of stimuli such as the constant presence of cars, pedestrians, vendors, and street-musicians and -

artists. As Terri's mother indicated, "Manhattan which is so sort of awake 24 hours a day and big and hard and charged up and high energy." These qualities of the urban environment were at their peak for children during the holiday seasons and/or when parents spent time with their children shopping and visiting places around the city.

*"There are enormous resources that ... delight the eye, the ear, to just walk through and witness. The stimulus in the city is staggeringly rich and varied ..., I think the city far exceeds the opportunities available in the rural or suburban situations." (Roberta's father)*

Because of the diversity of people and resources available in New York City and Park Slope, virtually all of the parents perceived the urban environment as receptive and appropriate for children's development and their needs to explore both to satisfy their curiosity about the world and learn about themselves. This was especially true about parents' perceptions of Park Slope, which they often referred to as having a community-oriented, family-oriented and kid-friendly atmosphere. These qualities of Park Slope meant that their children had choices of peers from different ethnic and economic backgrounds with whom to interact in their nearby home environments. They also talked about how local stores and cultural institutions treated children well and offered them special services and programs.

Such a rich and diverse urban environment, parents believed, helped instill in their children a sense of tolerance for others and acceptance of the world as inhabited by diverse and "good" people, and opened their minds to the riches that different people and

cultures from various parts of the world can offer them right in ‘their own backyards.’ Parents indicated that this diversity afforded their children a sense of belongingness in a broader world, and thus was beneficial to their social, cultural, and intellectual development.

*“It’s got a small-village atmosphere ... I feel like daily life is connected to the way it used to be, .... You know, you walk outside, and immediately there’s a social connection. I think it’s socially healthy.” (Lori’s mother)*

*“What I like about this neighborhood and the diversity, ... he doesn’t feel like a minority in this neighborhood at all. And I don’t think he feels like an outsider here, so that’s nice. ... There’s no veneer of anything. I mean, people are just who they are in New York.... What I like about Park Slope is also there is a mix of professional and artists. The racial mix, ... the homosexual and heterosexual mix [are] all good. I mean, I just really like it a lot. And that extends to all of New York.” (Chang’s mother, middle class family)*

However, parents put different levels of emphasis on the positive qualities of the urban environment. Some parents’ perceptions of the city and neighborhood were more focused on certain types of diversity and less on others, and these perceptions were influenced by parents’ class status. The upper middle class parents talked about the positive aspects of the city for children, especially going to places in Manhattan to shop,

visit educational institutions, eat out, and enjoy Broadway shows. For them these urban affordances, especially commercial and educational places, were financially accessible and an important reason for having chosen to live and raise their children in the city.

*“Whenever we take the kids to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which we do frequently, or to Central Park, or to any of the museums ..., or ... to Broadway and off-Broadway shows, or ... to any one of a million different kinds of restaurants in Manhattan, my husband and I always marvel at the fact of what we can give our kids in the city.” (Nina’s mother, upper middle class family)*

*“I think it is a good neighborhood for children on a lot of levels. The local public schools are quality schools .... There are the private schools. There are the after school centers. The Brooklyn library, and Brooklyn Museum are spectacular resources. I think Prospect Park is one of the great back yards that a city could possibly hope for.” (David’s mother, upper middle class family).*

Although most of the working and middle class parents perceived such commercial places to be beneficial to their children and felt that they did not take them to these places as often as they would have liked, their perceptions of the city were focused more on the community-like atmosphere of the neighborhood, the cultural and economic

diversity of the city and neighborhood, and the diversity among people rather than institutional diversity.

*“I think the neighborhood is the best place for children to grow up. Because most of the people in the building I know and talk them all the time, they're from different cultures and like the kids. That's important.”*  
(Elga's mother, working class family)

*“They haven't been sheltered. Not that this isn't the case in most major cities but they understand the whole issue with people that are homeless. They understand everybody isn't white middle class living in a house that has a backyard and trees around it. I think that will serve them well.”*  
(Tony's father, middle class family)

## **Negative Sides to City Living**

Despite the positive perceptions of the neighborhood, parents identified some negative sides to the neighborhood and challenges related to their children's access and enjoyment of the city. Parents' perceptions of challenges in the urban environment ranged, from benign to serious safety issues (e.g., hanging out children, dirty streets, burglaries, crimes), and from urban fears and over-vigilance to gentrification issues. On a few of the safety issues such as crime and bullying in the neighborhood and fears of the larger urban environment, parents' perceptions differed based on their socio-economic class, and places of upbringing (urban or suburban). Parents' perceptions of challenges

in the urban environment can be categorized into the following four major themes: (1) cost of accessing the city, (2) safety issues, (3) consequences of gentrification, and (4) urban fears and over-vigilance.

### **Financial Cost of Accessing the City**

As indicated in Chapter Five, parents in this study said that the financial cost of accessing the city affected which places their children explored. Many of the parents talked about how expensive the city is and indicated that this makes it hard to take advantage of all that it has to offer. It seemed from the parents' accounts that the city couldn't be enjoyed without money. As John's father indicated, "... the problem with New York City is that if you have money, it's a nice place. If you don't have money, it's not a nice place...." Parents noted the expense associated with visiting most places, including entry fees and transportation costs. It is especially expensive for families with more than one child to take their children to places like museums, zoos, theaters, and movies. Many parents mentioned the costs of babysitters and shopping with their children. Some parents indicated that their increased enjoyment of the city was commensurate with increase in their salary over the years.

*"I'll tell you the truth. Since I've started making more money, I've started to enjoy it. You've got to make money to enjoy New York. I mean New York is a piece of shit if you don't have money.... If you don't have the money to enjoy the opportunities, it's all abstract. Now that my income is better, I mean, I'm actually doing more stuff and I love it more and more.*

*I mean, I think I'm here for the long run. Income is real important, I think, in order to appreciate the good parts because it doesn't come free."*

*(Chang's mother)*

*"It's expensive to have kids here.... A friend ... says to me, you know they have a really great exhibit on China [at the Guggenheim], and I was thinking, wow, my kids would like that, and she was telling me it was \$12. That is \$36 for three of us. That is a lot of money. You've got to really think about it, plus the subway fare, which would be another \$9. You've got to think about that before you do it." (Andres' mother)*

Not surprisingly, these costs were an issue especially for working and middle class families whose children as a result tended to visit most educational and entertainment places in the city via school trips. These trips had become infrequent, and were rarely offered (once or twice a year) because of school budget cuts. This belief about the relationship between money and access to city resources for their children led some parents to ponder why "poor" families chose to raise their children in an urban environment, and some of them perceived the city as gradually closing off children's opportunities for rich place exploration, especially for children from economically disadvantaged families.

*"I think that if I was poor and if I were talking about poor people in general I would much rather, I think it is much better to live outside of the*

*city. Rural areas are better, healthier places if you don't have money. The streets of the city are mean if you are poor. I think that New York City as a big, old city is probably meaner than most if you really don't have the resources to cope with it." (Roberta's father)*

These findings reflect those of earlier research, which found that large urban centers like New York City are often not responsive to the developmental needs of children for rich, appropriate, and independent place exploration, due to broad political and economic forces such as the public disinvestment in children's play provision, and the increased privatization of children's play spaces (Cahill, 2000; Hart, 2002 & 1986; Katz, 2004; Nevarez de Jesus, 1999; Wridt, 2004). To resolve the problem of New York City children's access to safe public space, Katz (2004) shows how "many residents resort private means .... Middle-class parents who are not able to stay at home with their children, for instance, often pay a baby-sitter to accompany them to after-school activities, including visits to places like Central Park. Likewise, higher-income households are able to afford and arrange for a greater range of after-school, weekend, and summer programs for their children. While these strategies reduce their children's dislocation from the public environment more readily and safely than the often isolating options available to poorer households, middle-class families increasingly have resorted to securing private spaces for their children's play, either within their housing developments, in gated communities, on the property of private schools or clubs, or through various pay-for-play programs" (pp. 177-178). As a result, the bulk of the cost of raising children into productive citizens, who learn and benefit from richly designed

urban public places for play and independent exploration (Hart, 2002), rests increasingly on the shoulders of parents. As Katz (2004) argues, with lack of public investment in all children's needs for safe public space, poor and working class families, who can barely meet these new financial demands in raising children, will continue to struggle in finding appropriate and affordable play environments for their children.

## **Safety Issues**

Safety was a complex phenomenon as far as children and the urban environment were concerned for most parents. Although most parents perceived their neighborhood to be safer than the city, they usually qualified the statement or talked about the strategies they used to try to keep their children safe; in other words, they felt safe if they took precautions to deal with what they perceived to be an unsafe situation for their children. This is consistent with several earlier studies, which found that: "While statistical accounts might reveal patterns in criminality, it is ultimately a personal decision to estimate the level of danger in a situation and the amount of risk a person is willing to take in a threatening situation, and this is often a question of perceptions" (Nevarez de Jesus, 1999, p. 44). In addition to this personal and individual approach to safety issues, research has identified three important dimensions to understanding how safety issues manifest themselves in the physical and social environment: structural socio-economic and ideological forces, which shape and define the safe use of public spaces based on their design (e.g., lighting, visual access, aesthetics, surveillance), maintenance (e.g., cleanliness), and encouragement of community activities. Further, "many leisure spaces such as parks and playgrounds end up being largely segregated because of racialized and

class residential segregation” (Nevarez de Jesus, 1999, p. 42). These structural socio-economic and ideological forces, and personal and individual approaches to public safety issues are critical in understanding parents’ perceptions of the city and Park Slope as places to raise their children and under what conditions to allow them to explore independently. These approaches are reflected in the perceptions and attitudes of the parents in this study. Parents emphasized some public safety issues more than others based on their class and their own place of upbringing. As I explain further below, some parents’ perceptions were exclusively focused on fears of traffic and crime, which were largely based on their places of upbringing, while others focused solely on the negative consequences of gentrification on the quality of life in their neighborhood based on class.

### **Traffic**

Traffic dangers are directly linked to the design layout of the urban environment, and rarely take into account children’s use of outdoor spaces. These are of great concern to parents for children’s independent exploration of places and mobility in urban settings (Wridt, 2004; Hart, 2002; Malone, 2001; Depeau, 2001; Hartloff et al., 1998; Cummingham et al., 1996; Hilman, 1997; Aitken, 1994). Further, “the responsibility of adults to drive safely, use their indicators, and keep to speed limits is rarely given much attention, yet individualized health promotion messages emphasize the responsibility of children to learn to cross the road safely” (Morrow, 2001, p. 30). Traffic is one of the major threats to children’s safe access and use of public places (Bjorklid, 1994; Hillman & Adams, 1992). As a result, children’s mobility is restricted within urban

environments, and adults have increased supervision of their children's activities in the outdoor environment.

In my research, road traffic was a major source of anxiety for parents, and was their number one concern because of the amount of traffic in the Park Slope vicinity. They referred specifically to five avenues (4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and Flatbush Avenues) within the neighborhood and the traffic circle at Grand Army Plaza as difficult for children to negotiate on their own. As Bradley's mother told me, "The Grand Army plaza, I think, even as an adult it's hard to negotiate because of traffic. ... you have to cross Flatbush Avenue, and the lights are timed in such a way that you have to stop in the median, you can't cross all the way, .... So I regard that as safety ... in terms of traffic." These high-density traffic zones created physical boundaries within the neighborhood and negatively influenced children's independent mobility in and around Park Slope. The amount of traffic made parents feel nervous about letting their children play or bike on neighborhood streets and/or cross main avenues alone to get to places like school. As mentioned in Chapter Four, most of the children who lived between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Avenues were not allowed to walk to school alone, and comprised 71 percent of the total number of the children who were not allowed to walk to school alone. Dealing with traffic, especially around Grand Army Plaza, was even a challenge for adults.

*"I guess that's why she hasn't started biking. ... From here down to her friends' house in Prospect Heights, there's a lot of traffic. All those issues of being hit by a car. ... There's too much traffic, so you're not quite*

*ready to give them that freedom for biking so I think it's limited in that way." (Jan's mother)*

*"There's a lot of traffic. And sometimes the cars, they go very, very quickly, and it makes me nervous. So I don't like that. For the kids, that would be my biggest worry." (Tisha's mother)*

## **Crime**

Although most U.S. cities have been enjoying a stabilization or gradual decrease in their crime rates in the past 15 years (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005), the issue of crime remains a reality for children and parents (Wirthlin Worldwide, 2001), and violent crimes are still common occurrences for those living in the most physically deteriorated neighborhoods of the city. Low-income families, have fewer means to provide their children access to alternative environments, are forced to contend with higher crime levels, and often keep their children indoors for these reasons. Parents' perceptions and experiences of crime in the urban environment have great consequences for children's independent use of public places and exploration of places (Cahill, 2000; Katz, 2004, 1995, 1993 & 1991; Nevarez De Jesus, 1999; Wridt, 2004; Williams & Kornblum, 1994).

Although they perceived the large-scale urban environment to be dangerous for children's independent place exploration, they did not substantiate this perception with concrete examples of crime. Parents' concrete geographies of crimes were very local. They talked about specific crimes in Park Slope based on their family experiences, including stolen bikes, purses snatched, muggings, apartment break-ins, and car break-

ins. Further, parents perceived some areas of Park Slope as places where crimes were likely to occur areas because these places were quiet and not much frequented by neighborhood residents. These areas included residential blocks near Prospect Park where most of the upper middle class families lived and quiet areas in Prospect Park such as heavily wooded areas, dirt roads, and the Vale of Cashmere tucked away from the more frequented areas of the park. However, the upper middle class parents were more likely to raise specific criminal activities in Park Slope, and discussed at length the reasons why their neighborhood was a target for crime. They believed strongly that it was due to the fact that their neighborhood exhibited a certain level of wealth as compared to the surrounding neighborhoods, despite the well-known fact that poor working class neighborhoods were targets of violent crimes on a daily basis, and at a greater rate than rich neighborhoods. As shown in Chapter Four, the children from the upper middle class families were the most restricted in their place exploration in Park Slope compared with the children from middle and working class families.

*“The Slope, because it is a wealthy area surrounded by poor areas, is a magnet for predators of different sorts. That is why cars are always being broken into. Although less now, but up until about a year ago, there were never ending purse snatches and small-time mugging things. There are still rapes and other things that happen everywhere. You just wish there would be none of those and that the best you can do is see less and less as you go. There is always irreducible minimum. Beyond that I kind of wish it was simply not as wealthy a neighborhood as it is.” (David’s mother)*

## **Bullying**

Neighborhood bullying is a rarely examined issue, is difficult to address because of a lack of definitional agreement about its various inconsistent and ambiguous meanings, and has a negative impact on children's abilities to independently explore the urban environment (Percy-Smith & Matthews, 2001). As a socially, culturally and historically constructed concept, according to Percy-Smith & Matthews (2001), bullying reflects "individual as well as dominant social assumptions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour" (p. 51), and manifests itself under four different forms: "barging in," "extortion," "intimidation," and "name calling." The first three forms of bullying were found to be primary reasons why children in Park Slope were not allowed to use and explore certain streets and play facilities, and resulted in the development of strategies of spatial and social avoidance by parents and children in this study.

The phenomenon of bullying in the neighborhood was only raised by the upper middle class parents in this study. They talked about the "older, rougher kids," "a bunch of kids [who] come ... as group, ... talk loud and act tough," who lived in the surrounding middle and poor working class neighborhoods and went to neighborhood high and middle schools. These children were perceived as "troublemakers," responsible for bullying some of the children in this study, and thus, were considered a nuisance to the neighborhood. The bullying episodes and intimidation tactics deployed by the older children toward the 10-year-old children occurred on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue when they were walking home after school and when they were at school and neighborhood playgrounds trying to use the play resources like basketball courts available there. This situation made it difficult for children to freely use the resources in these settings on a drop in basis, and

was a real source of frustration for parents as it restricted their children's use of neighborhood open spaces and some streets.

*“He can't go to the basketball courts in the schools because they're frequented by older, tougher kids. It's intimidating when a bunch of kids come as a group and they talk loud and act tough [My emphasis]. ... When [Bradley's school] lets out, the elementary kids can use the hoops. But when the kids from 51 [middle school] migrate over, they gradually kick the younger kids out of the scene. He'll take a basketball with him to school -- it's been stolen. ... So he's not a good candidate to go down there and play basketball with a bunch of middle schoolers who are going to take his ball away or harass him.” (Bradley's mother)*

*“... The kids that come from the surrounding poorer neighborhoods are often very hard pressed to deal with the wealthier kids in the immediate neighborhood and create problems .... Well, I'll give you an example, John Jay High School on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Street has, I'm sure, people of all sorts going to it but at 3 to 3:30 to 4 in the afternoon, the kids who are leaving John Jay and walking back to Prospect Heights and Bed-Stuy ... practically terrorize the neighborhood. It is not that they are bad kids. There are a number of different dynamics going on. One, they've got all the energy of typical high school kids that have been pent up all day, and now they are free. Two, they are walking through this*

*really nice neighborhood, and they are going home to neighborhoods that aren't. It makes them angry and sad and frustrated. That translates for the shop owners as petty shoplifting at the food stands. To the kids it translates to being pushed aside or shouted at or just made to feel threatened or intimidated. They are not equipped to respond to these bigger kids who have been dealing with threats all their lives and now can be threatening at the drop of a hat to a smaller kid," (Roberta's father).*

## **Consequences of Gentrification**

Gentrification refers to neighborhood changes through reinvestment, the improvement of its physical look, and gradual displacement of low-income residents by a higher income population (DeGiovanni & Minnite, 1991). It is part of the large economic and political phenomenon of urban restructuring driving the split between rich and poor communities (Harvey, 1990; Mollenkopf & Castells, 1991; Smith, 1996; Smith & Williams, 1986). At the same time that areas gentrify, they often experience a decrease in their levels of cultural and ethnic population diversity and strain community social relations because of class and ethnic differences between incomers and established residents in these working class neighborhoods. As the real estate market goes up, open spaces are often developed further reducing children's access to neighborhood open spaces. "The process of gentrification *displaces* poorer [Author's emphasis], often minority young people from public play and leisure spaces (often abandoned prior to gentrification) in favor of activities and spaces that cater to wealthier, often white young people (Wridt, 2004, p. 240). Park Slope with its 30-year-history of gentrification was

not immune to the negative consequences of urban restructuring on children's place exploration. As a resident of this neighborhood for 5 years in the 1990s, I witnessed most of the physical and social changes in Park Slope through the disappearance of empty lots (some of them had been used as community gardens) and buildings, which were turned into expensive coops, an increased demand for rental apartments, increased rental rates, a lot of properties for sale, as well as the appearance of expensive restaurants, boutiques, chain stores such as Blockbuster, and Barnes & Nobles, denser traffic flow, and crowded playgrounds.

Some of the parents in this study noted signs of the gradual erosion of ethnic and economic diversity in Park Slope as one of the consequences of gentrification. They believed that the process of gentrification was diminishing their ability to expose their children to the diversity of people and resources, which used to be part of the neighborhood as discussed in the sections above. This is how George's father expressed concerns about the gentrification of the neighborhood: "We want our kids to be exposed to a wide variety of people and, ... like many people we're very concerned about what's happening to Park Slope. That it's becoming an enclave of rich, white people." The "village-like" atmosphere of Park Slope was seemingly eroding as parents factored the concrete negative realities, which affected their perceptions of the neighborhood with regard to their children's independent exploration of places. They questioned the notion that the neighborhood was culturally, ethnically, and economically diverse because of the neighborhood's 30-year-history of gentrification, which had intensified in the last fifteen years with the development of new businesses located along 7<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenues and the

arrival of more white and upper middle class families. As a result, as Andres' mother put it, "It is actually less diverse now than it was. And that I'm sorry about, actually."

According to one mother, not all of Park Slope is equally diverse, "There are lines of demarcation, Fifth Avenue, Sunset Park." And though she values diversity, she says she is more comfortable in her part of the Slope "because it's a middle class society" and "just because people look like I do, and that's something that increases my comfort, even though intellectually I know that's not so." She also says that it is not economically diverse. (She seems to realize as she continues that it's not so much that they "look like" her, but rather that they are of the same class.)

*"I thought this neighborhood was very diverse, because there are heterosexuals, homosexuals, ... many African American proprietors who own businesses, ... but really, when I think of the demographics of Park Slope, it's upper middle class. I'm just barely hanging on as a teacher. So that's not good, in the sense that it's not diverse economically. One reason I sent her [Lori] to the Brooklyn New School is because it is balanced: one-third black, one-third white, one-third Hispanic. And there are no entrance tests. So it's a heterogeneous mixing of ability. Because that's what I wanted for her. Because she doesn't get it in this neighborhood, or frankly, with me." (Lori's mom)*

Some gentrifying families were not comfortable with what preceded them in the neighborhood, and did not like the increased presence of business establishments such as

restaurants and bars near their homes. For these middle class families, who recently moved into the neighborhood and shared street blocks with the last remnants of long time poor and working class families, the level of street noise, children hanging out on street, and vandalism were issues they did not like dealing with. Other negative sides to the neighborhood included dirty streets, bars, vials of crack on streets, and couples fighting. These issues rendered their enjoyment of the neighborhood a challenge, and thus, limited their children's independent use of the immediate outdoor environment around their homes.

*“My particular block is insane. I mean, kids are all in the street all the time. And there's a certain culture. There's like a cultural split. There's a lot of screaming, yelling, foul language, kids coming up to my flowers and just pulling them out by their roots thinking that's perfectly acceptable. I mean just really hard stuff, which is why I don't like him to hang out in the streets. I don't know if that's going to change over time, but right now, I don't like the kids that hang out on the street.” (Chang's mother).*

### **Urban Fears and Over-vigilance**

Although they perceived the broader urban environment to be less safe than their local neighborhood and were extremely vigilant and worried when visiting places beyond Park Slope, most parents did not provide any concrete evidence supporting their claims.

The only real challenge they raised about the broader environment was the high level of noise and distractions they have to deal with, and fears concerning the potential dangers inherently associated with cities. Some parents found the city to be a great source of stimulus overload, and thus intimidating and a source of potential danger to their children. They explained that this was due to the city's geographic size, large population, crowdedness, and street display of constant activities at any given moment. They asserted that these stimulations were overwhelming at times for them and their children. In such social and environmental conditions, which they perceived as less kid-friendly and welcoming for children, some parents indicated that they had to deploy much higher levels of supervision in order to keep their children focused and safe.

*“Well, I love New York City. But it's a very intense place to live....*

*There's a lot of motion all the time. You have to keep your wits about you all the time.” (Tisha's mother)*

As noted by most researchers of children's everyday geographies in cities (Katz, 2004; Wridt, 2004; Hart, 2002; Nevarez de Jesus, 1999; Valentine, 1995; Blakely, 1993; Moore, 1990), the ideology of parents' fears for children seems to have as much effect on their actions as actual occurrences of crimes and other dangers, and informs their decisions about how their children experience the broader urban environment. There has been an increase in the retrenchment of children into the indoors as a result of parental fears, which are sustained by social discourses about “stranger danger” (Valentine, 1996), and “terror talk” in the media (Katz, 1998), and represent a hodgepodge of intertwined

facts about real and exaggerated safety issues (Amendola, 2005). The news media, which don't usually present children and those who work with them on an everyday basis in the best light, is consistent in its mission of sensationalizing crimes committed on innocent children without providing any broad context for understanding these issues and concrete solutions about how to deal with them (Parker et al., 2001). Such practices put parents in a constant state of alert about their children's safety in the larger outdoor environment, and leave them with few options apart from keeping their children in varied indoor environments such as residential and educational places, and subjecting children to constant adult surveillance. The facts show that children are exposed to more risk and danger from non-strangers than strangers, and in private than public spaces (Nevarez De Jesus, 1999; Martelli, 1995; Bjorklid, 1984). However, parents continue to uphold strong perceptions and practices about the need to protect their children in urban public spaces, and often express concern about their children's ability to deal with social dangers (e.g., strangers, kidnapping, molestation) seen to be present in the urban environment.

Most parents in this study, especially those who grew up in suburban and rural areas, perceived the broad New York City metropolitan area as unsafe for their children's place exploration, were fearful of their children being abducted or molested, and felt required to maintain surveillance of their children in the broader urban environment. These parents tended to compare the city against the places of their upbringing. They indicated that growing up in suburban or rural areas provided them with more freedom to explore the outdoor environment than their children had growing up in an urban environment. They discussed the question of public safety for children in absolute terms,

that is seeing places as safe or unsafe, and shared their sense of regret and ambivalence about their decisions to raise their children in such an environment.

In contrast, the few parents in this study who grew up in New York City offered different perceptions of public safety for children in the larger urban environment. First, they acknowledged that absolute safety is impossible to secure in any place, especially in big cities like New York. Nonetheless, they perceived the city to be relatively safe for children who are willing to be cautious and pay attention to what's going on around them; caution, they believed, is part of the safety arsenal one needs to be a competent urban dweller. These parents also had a warier and more critical attitude toward the competing social discourses about urban fear and children's use of the broader outdoor urban environment.

*"I think it is a fairly safe city for kids to be in. Nothing is 100 percent safe. During a certain period of time, there was so much in the news about children disappearing and maybe a few children disappeared, yes, but they probably did before and after and we just didn't hear as much about it. I really felt like there was like a hysteria and I bought in, believe me, because who wants to be the one, who your kid is the one. Nobody wants that and the more you are thinking about it, it is frightening. But I think it did the kids a disservice because I don't really feel like it is very unsafe. Obviously, there are certain precautions you take. You don't send your kids out alone at night, go ahead and go wander around. But if you teach them a little bit about what to look out for, I don't see why they can't... I*

*don't really feel that safety is a huge issue to me. Maybe I'm just foolish but I don't think so. We are somewhat cautious." (Andres' mother)*

*"Well, I think there are places that you can go in the city that you can feel very safe and then there are places where you have to watch out for what you're doing. I've never had a problem on the street. I've never had anyone try to bug me or rob me. I walk around New York like I know where I'm going so that's part of the deal. I think New York, if you're careful, sort of like the way it is anywhere, if you're careful and you know where you're going and you pay attention to what's going on around you, I think New York is a relatively safe place. I don't think it's nearly as threatening as people that don't live here think it is. I'm rarely fearful when I'm anywhere in the city or in Brooklyn. But again, you just have to be a little cautious." (Tony's father)*

This ideology of caution toward urban fear did provide some of these parents a more balanced view of public safety issues in the city, which supported their children's independent exploration of the broader urban environment. The norms of these parental approaches to public safety issues were informed by a myriad of specific environmental and social conditions, which have their own safety requirements and need to be assessed in terms of the amount of risk and level of danger involved before the granting of independent mobility to children. As demonstrated in Chapter Four, Five and Six, this led most parents in my study to supervise their children's exploration of places in and

beyond Park Slope. Furthermore, parents' dual perceptions of the urban environment as a rich setting with a range of social and environmental affordances and a challenging environment with a range of safety and social issues reveals their contradictory struggle to provide independent autonomy in the city. This balancing act was a major source of preoccupation for parents.

*“I think the downside sometimes has to do more with safety issues. We do live in a city. ... I feel that I have to be there to drive them and pick them up or walk them ...[to] various places, that's more of a burden on me, which I'm willing to accept, ....” (Nina's mother)*

*“There's always issues of what's safe and what's not safe. Knowing ... to give them a lot of freedom. Both my daughters, as I feel they are ready to take it. And then you always worry about safety. Are they safe in the park? Or is she safe walking from here to her friends' house.” (Jan's mother)*

Parents tried to tackle the different facets of the ambivalent nature of the city for their children as best they could. They discussed and proposed ways to improve this situation of spatial restriction in children's daily lives.

## Design and Construction of Public Play Spaces

Parents complained about the lack of safe recreational space for young kids and bemoaned missing the kinds of environments that might enable their children to explore more fully. As John's father put it, "I guess I wish that there were more wooded areas that you could just explore. But he gets that in the summer time when we go away." Their recommendations about how to encourage children's use and exploration of places in the neighborhood included: improving the neighborhood recreational resources for children by making them more responsive to the play needs of different children's age groups in the neighborhood, providing more safe structures and surfaces, offering engaging outdoor activities, and increasing the number of basketball courts.

*"But recreationally I think it's really lacking, really, more so than the average New York City neighborhood. Even though the park is nearby, for younger children it's really driven by safety issues. He can only play league basketball held at an indoor school gymnasium. He can't play in the street because there's too much traffic. It's pretty limited. I have a real complaint with the dearth of recreational programs, or the availability of safe recreational space for younger kids. Even my older son, who's 17, when he was not on a school basketball team two years ago, he just wanted someplace to shoot baskets. And he couldn't find a place that he felt safe. There's no place outside of an established basketball league for him to play basketball, which runs from November to March. He can't walk to a neighborhood court. PS 321 closes the yard*

*after school. The yard is often closed. So really there's no place for him to go safely to enjoy the sport he likes playing. It's that kind of thing where as a parent you can't get around it. That's why I wish there was an indoor basketball program, or some sort of large recreational space that kids could use on a drop-in basis." (Bradley's mother)*

## **Parents' Strategies for Children's Exploration**

The experiences of leading children to significant places highlighted the restrictions parents placed upon children's independent mobility in the local environment. Most parents said that they were not only struggling with "When to let go?" but also "how to let go?" These were difficult questions and decisions that parents said that they faced in raising their children in the city. Parents knew their children were going to go to middle school in a year, and needed to be socially and environmentally competent to negotiate traveling and using public transportation alone. They also thought that the city had only a few good middle schools scattered over the five boroughs, so that school options for their children were going to be increasingly distant from home and neighborhood. This situation was starting to force parents to place looser limits on their children's place exploration by developing strategies to deal with perceived safety issues. The parents, who encouraged and gradually supported their children's solitary place exploration in the neighborhood through different types of strategies, were better prepared to deal with these questions, and let their children explore a growing number of places alone based on their own physical, environmental and social competence.

Parents used different strategies to monitor their children's place exploration and to help them develop the skills to travel safely to places alone. Parents' strategies were primarily focused on children's exploration of places in their neighborhood, and were distinct in terms of children's travel distance and level of supervision. Parents have strategies for unsupervised and supervised activities.

### **Strategies for Unsupervised Activities**

Parents devised strategies to support and encourage their children to go to school and places close to their homes by themselves. Some of the strategies were gradual and commonly used by parents, and focused on a step-by-step place exploration initiation using practical testing and training mechanisms such as supervising the child without being by him or her, and street crossing training. Other parents' strategies were spontaneous and based on specific family circumstances and less common.

#### **Step-by-step initiation strategies**

The step-by-step process of initiating a child about how to be alone in the neighborhood was commonly used among families in the study. For example, children were allowed to walk alone during one portion of the way to or from places like school or friends' houses, which gave them some experience in being alone in the neighborhood. The children were required to call before heading home and agree on a specific route so one of their parents could meet them halfway. Some of the parents provided safety tips

to their children when they were walking alone in the neighborhood. They did it without making them paranoid about urban fears and/or scared to explore places alone. They determined with their child the safest routes to take alone in the neighborhood. The criteria they used to determine the safest routes included: (1) Familiarity with route, (2) nice route that is pleasant to walk, and (3) route has to be ones used by adults like other parents at the time he or she is coming back from school.

*“I go there [friend’s house located 14 city blocks from his house] at least once a month usually from school. On my way back home, I walk alone. I’ll call my parents before leaving and tell them that I’m leaving and I’ll be walking on 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Then we’ll meet half way between my friend’s house and my house.” (John)*

*“We’d tell him how to walk. We’ve talked to him a little bit about just finding an adult if anybody bothers him. And a little bit about, a lot about, paying attention when he crosses the street.” (John’s father)*

*“If she is alone and that makes her uncomfortable, she can always tag along, especially when she’s walking to or from school and there are a lot of kids walking with parents. She can always sort of tag along behind somebody and sort of stay close and feel better that way.” (Terri’s mother)*

In other situations, parents hung around the vicinity of the child's exploration zone without being directly involved in their child's specific activities. Under these conditions, parents relaxed their spatial restrictions on children's place exploration by allowing them to roam to areas beyond where their parents could see them.

*"I don't go alone that much to any place. But I tell my mother, can I just go to the lake [in Prospect Park]? My mother is usually in the park, at the [9<sup>th</sup> Street] playground. And then I go alone to see the ducks at the lake."*  
(Ivan)

Another strategy employed by parents in my study included training their children how to cross streets safely in the neighborhood. Since traffic safety was a big concern for parents, they spent a lot of time teaching their children how to cross streets. Tisha's mother explained:

*"So we'll have episodes where I will be with her and I will send her across the street on her own. I'll stand on the corner and say 'go,' or she will decide when to go. So we've been doing that periodically this year. So that she becomes more comfortable with crossing on her own."*

These early (and quite limited) independent forays of the independent and supervised explorers to further places in the neighborhood were typical strategies parents used to help their children cope with going to places on their own without getting scared

and nervous. These step-by-step processes allowed children to go to places with their friends or by themselves.

### **Spontaneous strategies**

Some parents used what I refer to as spontaneous strategies because they encouraged their children to go alone to places without much preparation, which caused some apprehension and anxiety for some of the children who had internalized some of the urban fear surrounding their upbringing. Parents had to reassure their children that they were socially and environmentally competent to walk alone in the neighborhood. Tom, who, according to his mother, did not express any interest in going alone to places, was nonetheless encouraged and allowed to go to places by himself, even without friends. Tom did not seem to be aware he could do it by himself.

*“I was the one [Tom’s mother] who said, you know what, today you’re going to go down to McDonalds. He said, ‘oh no, I’m not.’ I said ‘why don’t you try it? If you’re afraid, come on back.’ ‘Wow, okay.’ And then he felt so proud of himself.”*

For Terri, however, it was a totally different first experience. What happened is that she decided that she did not want to participate in the after-school classes being provided at her school anymore. This coincided with both of her parents not being able to pick her up from school at regular classes’ dismissal. According to her parents, her

only options were to walk home by herself or take after-school classes at her school. She chose to walk home alone. This is how her mother explained the situation.

*“Well, she had real anxiety attacks. She got very upset the night before. And we said, look, you know you wanted to stop your after school program. If that’s what you want, this is what it means. And we wouldn’t do this if we didn’t feel that you were perfectly capable and you would be perfectly safe. So you just have to think it through and think how you can do it that it will make it the most comfortable for you. And she, in fact, was fine. But the anticipation of it made her very nervous. So anyway, I think it’s hard. I think in New York City it’s hard [to raise children].”*

*(Terri’s mother)*

## **Strategies for Supervised Activities**

In addition to totally supervising their children’s place exploration in the neighborhood, parents relied on different strategies to provide more safe place exploration opportunities for their children in a neighborhood most of them perceived as very safe. They took steps to provide specific instructions to their children about what to do, where to go if they were in danger, threatened, or worried about something while using the outdoor environment in Park Slope. Parents’ strategies included (1) staying in regular contact via telephone, (2) broadening children’s community ties, and (3)

consulting with other parents about safety issues relative to specific and spontaneous circumstances.

### **Staying in regular contact**

In order to be allowed to go to furthest places in Park Slope alone or with friends without being accompanied by adults, parents often provided their children with some understanding that they could call in their plans and location via telephone. The strategy was to call once they arrived at and before they left their destination, which allowed parents, who knew how long it took to get from place to place in the neighborhood, to virtually monitor their children, and thus, appeased their fears about something awful happening to their child out there without an adult escort. Although this strategy supported children's exploration of further places (usually the vicinity of friends' houses) alone or with friends, it had limitations. It was hard to apply to situations like when children went to playgrounds, parks and other open spaces in Park Slope where they did not have access to a telephone.<sup>6</sup> This may have contributed to children not being allowed to go these furthest places without adult supervision.

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<sup>6</sup> This study was conducted before the cell phone phenomenon in children's lives today.

### **Broadening children's community ties**

As stated above, both social and environmental competence acquisition was critical to children's independent place exploration from parents' perspectives. Most parents, who did not allow their children to go any place alone or with friends, felt that they were not socially prepared to deal with complex and dangerous social situations such as being approached by strangers or any sort of abduction attempt. In order to address this issue, some parents rehearsed with their children scenarios of how to meet people they didn't know, walk on neighborhood streets, request what they needed, and get home safely. In addition to these safety-training tips, parents through the Safe Haven program enlisted the support of storeowners whose stores were located on the main avenues used by the children to get to different places in the neighborhood, to watch out for and assist their children in case of trouble. Parents introduced their children to some of the shopkeepers whose stores were located on the children's routes. For example, some mothers explained how the process of tapping into local shopkeepers in the neighborhood worked:

*"I said 'this is my daughter Lori. I'm Laura. I'm your neighbor.' I said, 'Lori's going to be coming for bread or milk or cat food sometimes. I wanted to introduce you so that you knew who she was, and if she ever needed help, she could ask you. If someone was bothering her, or if she didn't have enough money.' There are shops, ... proprietors that I go to so often, .... I try to find the shopkeeper's name, ... and then we go over to*

*them. ... I ask her to pay for the food while we're in there so that they get to know her a little. I'm trying to make her be safe in the neighborhood."*

*(Lori's mother)*

*"These vendors have said they say will allow the kids to use the phone to call for help. Or they'll call the cops. Seventh Avenue has a lot of them and Fifth Avenue has some." (Chang's mother)*

*"They [Bill and his older brother] go shopping. When I ask them to go shopping for me. They can go as far as 12<sup>th</sup> Street to get cold cuts, food, bagels, stuff like that. They pretty much know the local neighborhood. And the people know them. The storeowners know them. A lot of people know them. They know me and they know my children." (Bill's mother)*

As they were being trained in this strategy, which took some time (six months to a year), some of the children were getting less comfortable with the process, and were starting to resent their parents over-instructional practices and over-protection. According to Lori's mother, her daughter felt that she understood the strategy, was able to negotiate the outdoor environment independently, and did not need too much help from her mother. She told her mother, "You're trying to help me too much."

### **‘Checking out the waters’ with one another**

Conferring among each other to decide whether to let their children go to furthest places in the neighborhood unsupervised by adults was another strategy, which provided some social reassurance and sanction for parents. Most parents felt that they needed to confer among themselves to share and assess their levels of comfort about issues of distance and safety based on their children’s level of social competence because parents were not worried about their children’s ability to find their ways to places with friends or by themselves with some adult guidance. By sharing information about their children’s social and environmental competencies and whereabouts, they relied on each other as one way to support their children’s independent exploration of the neighborhood with their friends and siblings.

*“At the beginning of the year, there was a little conversation amongst the parents of that ‘Are you comfortable having all the kids walk up there by themselves?’ And most parents said, ‘Yeah, that sounds fine.’ Before this year, either I would go to school and take him and walk him and a large group of kids up or one of the other parents would meet with the kids in the schoolyard and they would all walk up together. Now they know where to go.” (George’s father)*

*“Like last night, ... Joe [Tony’s young brother] had a baseball game that started at 5:40 and Tony and three of his friends were hanging around*

*and they're watching the little kids play and they're like, "We're bored." And they said, "The chorus at [Public School] 321 is doing a performance tonight so can we go down and see it?" And all the parents of the three kids ... were there and we kind of discussed it .... " And everybody said yeah. It was still light out at that point and so we gave them money to get into the show and they all walked down and we said, "Just wait at the school. We'll be there right around the same time the performance gets over and just wait for us." We got down to the school about 8:15 and they were all kind of hanging out in the schoolyard. It was fine." (Tony's father)*

Parents recognized the importance of children's independent exploration of the urban environment, and dealt with it as best they can in their everyday lives. Most devised flexible strategies to adapt their children's place exploration to an ever shifting and complex urban environment by relying often on their own individual perceptions of the city as a place to raise children, and a few community oriented initiatives such as the Safe Haven Program. Besides these mostly individualized strategies devised by parents to support their children's independent place exploration, there is a great need for schools to play a greater role of helping children, especially those from working class families, explore more frequently and in meaningful ways the broader urban environment. School playgrounds, already familiar to children, can be upgraded to more rich environment for play and exploration and adapted developmentally to children's social and physical needs (WEY Initiating & Coordinating Group, 1972), where children have access to a play

supervisor to mediate conflicts, and which are open after regular school hours. This might sound like wishful thinking in the face of public disinvestment in the maintenance of existing urban school and playground infrastructure (Hart, 2002; Katz, 2004). “Were staffing available more widely in New York’s parks, ... and neighborhood, the everyday lives of city children, especially working and middle class children, would change markedly. But it is precisely in such arenas that public disinvestment in social reproduction is most apparent, the advent of ‘playground associates’ notwithstanding” (Katz, 2004, p. 174).

Letting children explore places throughout their neighborhood alone as an experimental first step was a strategy that some parents in my study implemented effectively (I believe that it is a strategy worth doing in order to help children negotiate the larger urban environment independently and safely). This is the most opportune period in their lives to experiment with places and people not only around their homes and schools, but also the entire neighborhood. For example, the parents of the independent explorers in my study did not let concerns about safety override their children’s need to explore independently. They helped their children learn how to negotiate places, people, and public transportation within their neighborhood, ensuring they develop both social and environmental competences. In contrast, the parents’ of the supervised explorers in this study were overprotected to such a degree that their children had internalized their parents’ safety concerns and were feeling socially incompetent during their early independent place explorations. These parents’ messages about children’s place exploration and the quality of the urban environment are very powerful, and need to be thought through carefully, and discussed perhaps with other parents,

school officials, and local governmental and political officials in order to find supportive solutions to children's safe place exploration in their neighborhood by themselves. For example, since walking to school alone is very important to children and can afford safe independent exploration of places in the neighborhood, school officials can find adequate ways to ensure parents who request it to know that their children arrived at school safely especially in this age of advanced digital technologies. Developing these strategies is critical because places near their homes and schools afforded the best safe opportunities for independent exploration for the children in this study. In fact, this was the only chance they had to experiment independently with the social and physical environment, test their abilities, and build their self-confidence socially and environmentally before expanding their spatial range to further places in and beyond their neighborhood.

While parents provided strategies to make their children (and themselves) comfortable within the neighborhood, concerns about children's place exploration in the rest of the city resulted in adults over-protecting children as they traveled further from their homes, through their neighborhood, and into the broader urban environment. Parents' perceptions of Park Slope and New York City as places to bring up children, whether positive or negative, shaped the ways their children explored the urban environment. Even when the parents in my study thought the neighborhood presented only limited public safety risks, they still prevented their children's easy access to places in the neighborhood. The restrictions on children's activities were both for the sake of their protection and safety and for parents' peace of mind, which is the topic of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER SEVEN RULES AND PLACE EXPLORATION

*“Within the apartment, he is required to knock on a closed door before walking in. ... He is permitted to access ... [the kitchen] cabinets but either with one of us there or for a good reason ....  
... Really nothing good to do in those places [basements and hallways] and ample opportunities to either fall or to create a noise problem for other people .... So these are [indoor] places that we have told him not to do more to use than pass through or for specific purposes. ... He is required to take care of homework and his chores, either before he does things for pleasure or to tell us what his plan is for doing them ....” ... He is permitted to move about on his own in what we think is a fairly safe boundary for the part of the city he lives in. We have yet to have an experience with him where we have said you can go somewhere by yourself and found him somewhere else or even think that he has pushed that envelope.” (David’s mother)*

The role of rules in the explanation of social behavior is not new, and has been addressed by philosophers, linguists, sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists. “The idea that certain behaviours are explicable in terms of rules may be found in the works of Kant, Spencer, Saussure and others. In this century it has been advanced most notably by Wittgenstein and Chomsky, who together introduced the notion of rule to the study of language and, through this, to investigations of non-linguistic behaviour” (Collett, 1977, p. 1). In this literature, rules are varied in types (e.g., legal rules, religious rules) and origins (e.g., informal agreement, convention), and conceived as a bridge between thought/speech and action. Although it is hard to find either an agreed upon definition of rules in this vast literature or a substantial discussions of rules in the context of children’s use of the physical environment with the exception of work by Wood and Beck (1994) and Hart (1979), there seems to be agreement on some aspects of the environmental nature of rules. To gain a better understanding of the relationship

between rules and social behavior within a specific physical and social environment like the neighborhood, and an activity such as children's place exploration, however, I relied on the few and recent studies, which have investigated the impact of families' rules on children's use of both indoor (Wood & Beck, 1994) and outdoor spaces (Harloff et al., 1998; Hart, 1979; Medrich et al., 1982; Nevarez de Jesus, 1999; Valentine, 1997; Wridt, 2004). Although these researchers have referred to the concept of rule as 'permission' (Hart, 1979), 'instruction' (Nevarez de Jesus, 1999), and 'conventions' (Wridt, 2004), their studies of spatial rules have helped to reveal some of the hidden social and cultural ideological bases of childhood in relationship to the spaces children inhabit (Harloff et al., 1998; Hart, 1979; Medrich et al., 1982; Nevarez De Jesus, 1999; Valentine, 1997; Wood & Beck, 1994; Wridt, 2004).

Wood and Beck (1994) debunked the notion that rules are universal, that is, guide conduct of actions everywhere, by demonstrating that rules are always socially and environmentally situated and thus vary. "There are rules observed at school which are not observed on the street, rules observed in the playground which are not observed at home, and rules observed in the living room which are not observed in the bathroom. The pretense of universality crumbles under the demands of every specific site ... To enter a room is to find oneself immediately amid objects whose character and arrangement admit only of certain possibilities, it is always to enter a unique system of rules" (Wood & Beck, 1994, p. 2). Their framework for looking at the production and reproduction of a very specific space encompasses three analytic forms: values and meanings, rules, and objects. These three interrelated forms create "a net or felt of meanings and values capable of shaping the behavior that gives rise to the room" (Wood

& Beck, 2004, p. xviii). Within their phenomenological, structural, semiotic, political, psychological, and environmental readings of a single room's rules, Wood and Beck (1994) demonstrated the centrality of rules as socio-cultural tools used by different social actors to order and sustain everyday living in a specific domestic space. Using this framework and focusing closely on the social interactions of two boys' (11- and 9-year-old) and their parents around their household rules in this one space, they identified a web of 228 rules related to safety issues, behaviors, and the handling of the seventy objects in the room. Of special relevance to my work is their concept of "rule space," which they defined as the rules' relationship to the objects in the room and/or the child, and included the following rules:

- Protection rules (e.g., "Don't push on the screen," "Don't get your fingers caught in the door")
- Control rules (e.g., "Close it every time you go through," "Don't open it to strangers")
- Appearance rules (e.g., "Don't talk through the screen to guests or friends," "Keep your hand off the woodwork")
- Unspoken rules ("Keep the house safe," "Explain to your friends what the rules of the house are") (Wood & Beck, 1994, pp. 309-326).

Despite their very useful framework for identifying and analyzing home rules, Wood and Beck did not *delve* into the explicitly structuring nature of rules in children's spatial exploratory behaviors. Nor did they deal with the role of rules in children's use of

the outdoor environment, both of which are critical to studying children's place exploration.

In his study of children's experience of place in a small town in Vermont, Hart (1979) looked at the impact of parental rules on children's territorial range. He documented the ranges parents defined for their children's exploration of the outdoor environment, and how children experienced these defined ranges. He found that there were "considerable discrepancies between the rules as stated by parents, as followed by children, and as executed by the parents" (p. 43). For example, parents were more lenient with boys than girls regarding the breaking of rules related to parentally defined territorial range. In her study of children's everyday experiences of outdoor places in Harlem, Wridt (2004) also found that girls more than boys were required to check in with their parents about their whereabouts, and that this rule was unevenly followed by children and enforced by parents. In Nevarez de Jesus's study of children's use of a playground in Central Park (1999), parents developed and used rule-based strategies to protect their children from perceived dangers in the urban environment such as traffic, strangers, and sexual molestation. These rule-based strategies included holding hands when crossing streets, not talking to strangers, communicating safety issues to parents. She also found that there were differences in the types of safety instructions given to the children based on their gender: girls were instructed about issues of sexual molestation while boys, who were perceived as "tougher" than girls and who were not told about sexual threats, were provided with fewer safety instructions. Finally, these studies highlight the fact that children were not passive observers of their families' rules in the outdoor urban environment, and were continuously negotiating and challenging the

parentally defined geographic boundary rules. “It quickly became clear ... that while parents certainly had the final deciding voice, the definition of the range was often a shared one – a product of negotiation and understanding between parents (usually the mother) and child” (Hart, 1979, p. 46).

As these studies suggest, families’ rules are critical to understanding children’s place exploration. In my work I found to a great extent that children were exposed to different types of rules depending on their parents’ environmental perceptions and levels of comfort with the environment. With different levels of enforcement, most of the children were reminded to follow specific indoor and outdoor rules regarding responsibilities at home, recreational activities in the indoor environment, use of spaces in their homes, time, telephone communication while away from home, safety and security of the home, playing outside, and territorial range. Family rules were clearly divided into indoor and outdoor rules.

## **Indoor Rules**

Indoor environments like homes are hard to understand in relation to the development of children’s self-confidence and competence without examining the rules governing their use. Indoor rules are critical in putting some order in the everyday lives of people in most households, and allow family members to have some shared understanding about how to live with each other (Wood & Beck, 1994). The rules help turn home environments into rational and meaningful living spaces through such things as teaching children how to manage their time after school or how to help with household

chores. “Without the rules the home is not a home, it is a sculpture of wood and nails, of plumbing and wiring, of wallpaper and carpet” (Wood & Beck, 1994, pp. 1-2).

The families who participated in my study had some rules that governed their children’s behavior in the home and other indoor places like friends’ homes. Families’ indoor rules were focused primarily in the management of the household as a social and environmental unit. They were directly related to children’s responsibilities and the management of their time. Some of the indoor rules were more explicitly stated than others, and most parents expected their children to internalize them and use them to self-regulate their behaviors in the household. The children were expected to act as “connoisseur” of these rules with little explicit enforcement, that is, to know what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior inside their homes based on their own environmental and moral judgment and their understanding of the consequences of their actions.

*“[The indoor rules] don’t need to be articulated. She knows that she can’t do certain things indoors.” (Jan’s mother)*

*“I don’t have to read a whole list of rules to them because they’re pretty well behaved. They know that they can’t get wild or go nuts or break things or run around screaming or things like that, but they know what they need to do.” (Nina’s mother)*

## Responsibility Rules

Some children's mobility and the types of activities they could engage in were restricted inside their homes and apartment buildings by environmental and social rules such as those about noise, privacy, and respect for others' property and space. To ensure that everybody in the household had some privacy, some parents enacted spatial rules about respecting the privacy of other household members such as knocking on closed doors, not entering certain spaces like siblings' or parents' rooms, and not disturbing parents who worked at home except in an emergency situation. Some parents had strict rules about noise. Children's making noise or engaging in active "free" play in the household was intolerable to some parents, and not allowed.

*"Well, we're pretty noise conscious both for ourselves being sensitive to noise and because we have people who live below us. So we're pretty strict about not making a lot of noise in the house." (Terri's mom)*

*"I have a noise intolerance, and they can't make a lot of noise. I don't like them stomping down the steps. And I don't allow them to get wild and climb on furniture. They don't slide down the banister. There's a lot of stuff other kids do I don't allow them to do. Yeah. Those are the rules."*

*(Bradley's mother)*

Families who lived in apartment buildings or had neighbors in their building had rules about their children's use of spaces in the building. Children were not allowed to

make noise, play ball and run on stairs, and hang out in building hallways and basements. According to parents, the main purpose of these rules was to maintain a peaceful environment in their building for the sake of neighbors' peace and to safeguard their children's safety. Some of the parents had rules motivated by other safety and security concerns. For example some have rules about visitors when there are no adults home; and maintaining and keeping the house safe by not letting intruders or strangers in, making sure the main entrance door is locked, and not playing with matches.

*“We have rules about who could come into the house .... That was based partly on individuals as well as on how many kids. ... I don't want to come home and find 20 kids in the house. It is just not safe if something should happen and there is ... no adult at home. Then sometimes it was based on a kid's personality. If I knew this kid had a really hard time with certain kinds of behavior, then they could come over but not when I wasn't home.” (Andres's mother)*

*“For example you don't leave the apartment without locking the door. You don't let people into the apartment without knowing them very well, if you are alone .... If he is alone, he knows there are things that he does and doesn't do. Mostly surrounding his own personal safety.” (David's mother)*

Some children were given specific social responsibilities around the house, and were expected to get them done, especially during school days. Some families gave the children specific household chores like clearing the table after dinner, washing dishes, and respecting people in the household. As Bill's mother said, "They do have chores .... They have to clean the table after dinner, ... wash the table down, ... do the dishes for me. Once in a while [Bill's older brother] cooks dinner for me." Some parents had rules that the children were expected to clean up after using things like toys, games, and books. Some children were not allowed to bring food in bedrooms and others shared living quarters outside the kitchen area like in living rooms. Some children were required to put everything away either before going to bed or at the end of their play-dates with friends.

*"To respect, that's the one rule I have! To respect everyone in the house. They [Elga and her siblings] have to be neat. They've gotta clean their own things." (Elga's mother)*

*"They [Lori and her friends] have to clean up after themselves. When she and her friends have a play date, they completely move one room to another, ... which I allow them to do. But they have to clean up." (Lori's mother)*

## **Time Management Rules**

Most parents used time management rules in order to help their children get their school work done, and to have time to engage in other non-curricular activities such as

playing games inside or outside their homes. They had specific rules governing when their children had to do their school work, which parents ranked as a priority over most of the activities that children considered to be fun such as playing videogames, watching TV, playing outside, and visiting friends. As Ivan pointed out, “After I do my homework, if it’s not like near six o clock I go outside and play with my brother.” Similarly, Nina’s mother said that she did not allow Nina to watch TV during school days until she was done with her homework. Most parents mentioned specific bedtime rules that their kids had to abide by. These bedtime rules were more flexible during the weekend than during school days.

*“They have to go to bed at nine thirty during the week. On the weekends they’re allowed to go to bed at ten. I don’t care how old you are, that’s the rule. You both go to bed at the same time. There is no difference.”*  
*(Bill’s mom)*

Most of these indoor rules were oriented around parents’ environmental and social preferences (e.g., noise, privacy, respect of others’ property, and responsibilities around school work and chores), but did have some bearing on children’s exploratory activities of the outdoor urban environment. In the indoor environment, “from the moment he [the child] rouses into consciousness each morning, it is a consciousness of what he must and must not do. ... So many rules! No matter how you count them, the number is enormous” (Wood & Beck, 2004, p. 1). In my study, rules were used primarily to instill in the child a sense of social responsibility and time management

skills. They were tightly interrelated and rarely negotiable because they were part and parcel of parents' childrearing practices in a very limited space (most of the children in the study lived in a two-bedroom apartment), and helped to create some order in the household for the benefit of most of its inhabitants. Within the household environment, rules function as part of a larger culture of what a place like home means to children and adults. "What for the child is a field of rules (the home) is for the adults a nest of comforts" (Wood & Beck, 1994, p. 24). This field of rules informed children's place exploration inside their homes in three ways: (1) places they were or were not allowed to use in their homes (e.g., parents' and siblings' bedrooms), (2) activities they were or were not allowed to engage in within their home environments (e.g., not going into basements, playing computer games), and the nature of their activities such as quiet explorations, which were acceptable for parents, versus active and noisy explorations, which parents perceived as problematic. It had implications for children's place exploration, especially in terms of the "free" time they had left after they were done with their required home responsibilities to engage in independent activities outside their homes.

## **Outdoor Rules**

Families' outdoor rules were a bit more open-ended in their degree of strictness and enforcement. Children were often able to negotiate these rules with parents. The rules reflected and were shaped by parents' preferences and their assessments of their children's personalities and degree of environmental and social competence in the urban environment. Many of the parents talked about the individual characteristics of their children as the determining factor in deciding what types and number of rules that they

would ask their children to follow in the outdoor environment, and their general approaches to rule enactment and enforcement. There were two major differences among the families: (1) some families had a lot of outdoor rules and their children experienced a highly rule bound environment, and (2) other families had very few rules and engaged their children in the process of the enactment and administration of outdoor rules. I refer to this latter approach as pragmatic. Outdoor rules had a direct impact on their children's exploration of the neighborhood. As discussed in Chapter Four, a pragmatic rule environment tended to produce independent explorers, while the supervised explorers lived in a more rule-bound environment.

### **Rule-bound Environment**

The parents of the supervised explorers had a high level of control over their children's independent and autonomous exploration of places, and this explains in large part their restricted mobility in the neighborhood (see Chapter Four and Five). Further, they had inculcated so many rules in their children over the years that their exploration of the outdoor urban environment was almost entirely bounded by rules. The children had internalized the rules so much that they could barely experience the outdoor places around their homes alone without feeling the need for adult supervision.

*"I would let them do that [go to the park across the street from her house]. They haven't asked yet. For so many years they had to have one of us that it sort of hasn't come up. It's funny. It's taking a while to begin to let her out on her own when we're so used to feeling that she has to be*

*with an adult all the time. And, you know, we tell her to, you know, cross at the corner and obey the traffic lights.” (Terri’s mother)*

These families’ outdoor rules were used to specify to the children where in the outside environment they can go, when they can go, how they can go and with whom, as well as what they can do. These rules were often very specific and not negotiable, and thus, constituted a challenge for the children. Virtually all of these rules were designed to protect the children from one hazard or another. Thus, the rules pertained to playing in limited spaces outside the home like building stoops, sidewalks and streets, and to dealing with strangers. These children, who were mainly girls, were accompanied by adults in their travels to most places outside their homes, they were required to respect traffic lights, not to talk to strangers, and let their parents know about their whereabouts on a regular basis.

*“She can play out in the front by herself, but I don’t allow her to cross the street, ... play ... on the sidewalk or the street, ... cross two-way streets like 7<sup>th</sup> Ave. ... She’s not ready. ... I have been practicing with her how to cross Avenues.” (Lori’s mother)*

*“... She’s not allowed to go off by herself. We tell her don’t talk to somebody you don’t know, .... If she’s crossing the street, we want her to be careful and look. But I can’t imagine it will be less than two years*

*before we feel comfortable letting her go out all by herself.” (Nina’s mother)*

The two strategies that these parents relied commonly on were visual surveillance and constant verbal communication with their child not only about their destination but also the people whom they were going with and going to meet once they arrived at their destination. The children were required to call and let their parents know that they had arrived safely at their destination, and then to let them know their departure time and estimated arrival time back home. These parents’ language about these communication rules was replete with expressions like “I need to know,” “they have to tell me,” which conveyed a strong sense of urgency and concerns about something awful which might happen to their child in the outdoor urban environment, and a certain lack of trust of aspects of the outdoor environment such as strangers and car traffic, which they could not control. Under these rule-bound circumstances, most of these parents had learned over time that they could trust their children not to go beyond the geographic boundary rules that they had outlined for them.

*“When it’s outdoors, we have sort of a limit of the part that she has to stay in and not go beyond. It’s basically the sidewalk and then this little stone house in the park. ... We need to know where she is.” (Terri’s mother)*

*“I need to know where he’s going: the destination and who will be there are issues.... The particular block, the route he had to take ... to that*

*friend's house. And the reliability of the friend or ... I knew they were being properly supervised.” (Bradley's mother)*

*“If they go with someone else they have to tell me. ... If they're going outside they have to tell me what time they're going to come back. When they go out not to talk with strange people.” (Elga's mother)*

### **Pragmatic Approach to Rules**

Most of the independent explorers in this study came from families who were more pragmatic about the use of rules around their children's exploration of neighborhood places, and were willing to negotiate with them about rules depending on where they wanted to go, with whom, and what they were going to do there. They indicated that they had few rules, and had no pre-set rules for everything or every situation (see also Wood & Beck, 1994). Instead they provided safety guidance but did not communicate to the child explicit and specific sets of rule for each unique situation on a constant basis. These were more like process rules. The children from these families, mainly boys, who were trusted in their abilities to handle both the outdoor social as well as physical environment on their own (see Chapter Four and Five). They were expected to internalize and understand these few rules, and self-regulate their conduct and action in the outdoors, that is, to determine on their own what was acceptable and unacceptable behavior outside their homes based on their knowledge of the consequences of their actions to themselves and others. Thus, the emphasis here was on encouraging children to communicate their needs and whereabouts, respect others' properties while

playing, and be focused and aware of what was going on around them during their travels in the neighborhood. This was not about the mechanical imposition of as many rules as possible for the sake of parents' comfort that rules would protect their children from the perceived dangers in the outdoor environments.

*“My rules are just pretty much on a case-by-case basis. I haven't written them down or spoken them out in a very set way. So I don't have a planned set of rules, however, if they ask me something and it sounds insane, I say no. About where they can go, I have not actually set some rules. But I guess we all have comfort levels with things.” (Andres's mother)*

*“Just the idea that we have to know where he's going means that he wants to go to some place that we're not comfortable with him going, then we're going to discuss it. I guess we don't really have that many set rules..., it's more if it comes up, we'll make a decision together.” (John's father)*

Through experimentation and discussion, these parents were demonstrating to their children that internalized rules alone were not sufficient to guarantee their safety in the outdoor environment, because every situation was different and required paying attention and being able to continually re-assess the validity of pre-set rules in new situations. They wanted to share with their children the idea that a deep understanding of the fluidity of social and spatial rules was key to negotiating the complexity of the

outdoor urban environment. For example, when Tony's father and Bill's mother were talking about street crossing they seemed to be talking less about paying attention to just the traffic signs than to the entire ecology around street crossing. This involved paying close attention by anticipating motorists not respecting the traffic signals, bikers, etc.

*“Crossing the streets and they will say to me, ‘Well the light said walk.’ And I’ll say, ‘Well, yeah but I’ve seen lots of drivers go right through that light that says walk. So even if it says walk, you gotta stop, and you have to look. You can’t just wander across the street.’ So they’re pretty tuned in to that.” (Tony’s father)*

*“You have to look to make sure that there are no turning cars when cars could be turning in your direction, they’re traveling the same direction you are, then they decide to turn so you always have to check for that, and that you only go when the walk sign is there, and that you always look around, even the direction where the traffic’s not supposed to come from, because that’s where the bikes come from, and people backing up and so forth.” (Bill’s mother)*

Further, these parents had more relaxed rules about boundaries within which their children could explore places independently in the neighborhood. These relaxed boundary rules were arrived at by parents through an array of assessments of their children's personalities and everyday independent use of the urban environment. Many

of these parents attributed their attitude to trusting some aspect of their child's social and environmental abilities such as a sense of responsibility, level-headedness, geographic competence, and comfort with the outdoor environment. As Chang's mother said, "One of the reasons why I don't have too many rules is that this kid ... doesn't do anything to the point where you think that it's sick. He sort of has a good sense of balance inside of himself. So I don't worry too much about him." When these parents talked about their children's geographic boundaries and their rules governing their children's place exploration, they seemed less to be discussing rules than the things they consider when deciding if their children could go somewhere by themselves, such as the time of day and whether there are a lot of people around. For example, one of the children in this study was allowed to go pretty much anywhere in the neighborhood alone or with friends and siblings as long she was back home before dark. Expressing her outdoor rules, this child's mother said, "Maria should come back home at seven o'clock and not past seven o'clock. If she does not come at seven o'clock, I will tell her no more going outside to play." Like the parents of the supervised explorers, a few parents of the independent explorers requested that their children let them know their whereabouts in the neighborhood. However, their communication rules were a bit looser, requiring only a general idea of their children's location if, for example, they went unexpectedly outside of the allowed geographic areas. Overall, these parents felt satisfied with their children's abilities to negotiate aspects of the neighborhood without adult supervision including crossing neighborhood streets and avenues.

*“They’re [Bill and his older brother] allowed to go to the library, all the way up to Grand Army Plaza. They never go past Fourth Avenue. They ... would go as far as the train station, friend’s house, and McDonalds. They know the rules. They have to stay together. They have to call me and tell me when they’re coming home. Even when they go to a friend’s house, they have to call me.” (Bill’s mother)*

*“... He was supposed to get picked up and he didn’t. So he came home by himself and I was a little upset with him that he didn’t call me. But he said why? Why should I call you? It looked like he could handle it. He’s very trustworthy. He’s a very responsible kid. ... [But] ... I have to have some general idea where he is. ... And we have a rule about playing on the streets. ... We like them to keep out of the street, but they play in the street. I mean, they’re city kids” (George’s father)*

In my study, parents governed and structured children’s place exploration with a multitude of social, psychological, and environmental rules. Rule production and enactment raised a lot of emotions, such as feelings of independence and autonomy, social and environmental preferences, and feelings about control, authority, and power. Families seemed to have rules for almost every situation that their children might find themselves in, including inside their homes and most places in the neighborhood. Although families differed in the number and strictness of their rules, they enacted and used rules commonly as ways to keep children safe from the dangers inherent in any

urban environment and teach them how to experience the urban environment on their own and with friends. As prescribed guides for children's conduct or action around certain dimensions of the indoor and outdoor environment (e.g., bedrooms, eating areas, indoor play areas, streets, stoops, parks) and the social environment (e.g., communication, respect for others' properties, preferences), rules functioned as a social and environmental compass used by parents to afford their children some autonomy, while allowing them some control over their children's whereabouts and activities at any give time of the day. This distinction reflects the different kinds of rule approaches (e.g., a more pragmatic approach versus a stricter monitoring approach) discussed above. Most parents would agree that the existence and use of this compass provided them some level of comfort by alleviating their safety concerns about the urban environment. At the same time, these rule-based strategies caused some children to feel restricted in their independent exploration of the urban environment even as they provided others with some autonomy.

At the heart of the realities of social and spatial rules was what activities parents deemed appropriate in and outside the home and their ideas about their children's abilities to explore the environment on their own. The home and neighborhood were fields of rules for the children in order for them to (1) be responsible participants in the daily running of their households and the management of their time for learning and play, (2) be safe in the indoor and outdoor environments, and (3) learn about how to negotiate the complex urban environment. Although children's lives were saturated with social and environmental conventions in and outside the home, some of the rules they were asked to subscribe to were more structuring of their place exploration than others because

of a range of factors such as their personalities, gender, age, physical abilities, environmental preferences, social and environmental competences, and parents' perceptions of safety in the urban environment. In addition, the enactment and administration of rules were influenced by whether children had access to older siblings. Andres's mother talked how she was stricter with Andres's older brother than Andres in terms of his place exploration in the neighborhood (see Chapter Five for more details). Raising more than one child probably afforded parents a better grasp of outdoor safety issues and the efficacy of certain rules in protecting their children, which permitted a few of the children in my study to be subjected to fewer rules about their use of the outdoor environment (see also Hart, 1979).

Parental rule enactment and administration allowed the children to expand their field of place exploration or limited it in serious ways, and reflected two separate messages. For the parents of the supervised explorers, rules were rules (non-negotiable) and used to restrict children's territorial range and protect them from the dangers inherent in any urban environment. This message had great implication for children's social isolation (see also Nevarez de Jesus, 1999). This rule-bound environment reverberated mordantly in the words of Bradley when he expressed how he felt about his restricted place exploration of the neighborhood by saying that he had a collar around his neck, or in Terri's first experience going to school alone when she had a "real anxiety attack" according to her mother (see Chapter Four for more details). As discussed in Chapter Five and by other researchers, girls are much more restricted by rules governing in their use of the outdoor environment than boys (see Harloff et al., 1998; Nevarez de Jesus, 1999; Wridt, 2004).

For the few independent explorers in this study, parents' rules were strategic and negotiable social and environmental processes that were used to encourage and support children's daily independent exploration of the urban environment in order for them to develop the environmental and social competences necessary to their "successful" negotiation of a complex urban environment like New York City. This approach to rules elicited a more active role for the child in dealing with outdoor safety issues as best they could but with ongoing adult input. Rules viewed in this context had a positive impact on children's (boys and girls) range of place exploration because they allowed them to demonstrate their social and environmental competences and strengthen their sense of urban place identity.

Most of the children in my study did not admit to engaging in any rule-breaking place exploration activities in the course of the interviews. Learning about this aspect of their lives would have required an ethnographic study with close participant-observation of children. However, Hart (1979) found rule breaking was a way "to demonstrate to their parents that they can handle some places previously thought undesirable" (p. 46). Therefore, understanding the interconnection among families' geographic boundary rules, their sense of the dangers present in the outdoor environment, and children's risk-taking behaviors is critical to children's place exploration. First, the formulation and management of rules should also be read against the backdrop that absolute safety is not attainable in any environment. "Absolute safety does not exist, life involves a certain degree of risk taking. Absolute safety in public space is impossible. Public spaces, cannot exist without people taking risks to venture outside of their homes and be with others, providing the opportunity of relating to others and connecting spaces through use"

(Nevarez de Jesus, 1999, p. 260). Second, risk taking and danger are not synonymous in children's search for adventure in the outside environment. According to Hart (1986), an either/or approach has been adopted by urban planners, lawyers and government officials, who do not take into account the need for a more balanced and judicious approach to satisfy, both children's healthy need to engage in risk taking play activities and the need to limit their exposure to dangers. It is critical to strike a balance between what is required to provide children both a sense of protection and yet allow them to search for adventure in an urban environment that is often lacking in rich and open play environments (Hart, 2002 & 1986; Nevarez De Jesus, 1999). In the context of a history of decreasing quality play environments for children in New York City, Hart (2002) poignantly argued that this lack of distinction has led to "a paranoid attempt to create no-risk environments. ... Whilst accident levels are high, the level of concern is out of proportion; accident rates for children in their homes are far higher. Physical challenge is fundamental to children's enjoyment of play; it will not be possible to remove this by design. Some children, if not challenged, will find dangerous ways to use playgrounds. Others are less likely to develop the physical competencies that can protect them injury in some other place or time" (p. 145). Parental rules alone are not enough to ensure children's access to rich and safe play environments in the city. This issues needs to be systematically tackled by government officials, and urban planners and designers (Hart, 2002; Katz, 2004; Wridt, 2004). However, my research and that of others have shown that the nature of family rules and their enforcement has a major effect on children's autonomous activities in and engagement with the outdoor environment.

## CHAPTER EIGHT CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

*Children wish to explore and experience a wider range of settings than public playgrounds can offer. Rather than assuming they need specific places and specific activities designed for them, the goal should be to establish the conditions within which they can find and create their own play. Children should be able to expand their competence gradually by exploring, playing and experimenting within a diverse physical world (Hart, 2002, p. 137).*

The preceding chapters have addressed 10-year-old children's exploration of places around their homes and schools, local neighborhood, and the broader environment of the city in relation to their parents' perceptions of the city as a place to raise children, and parents' social and environmental rules. My main research goal was to investigate and document (1) children's ways of exploring different local places in New York City, and (2) the social and environmental factors that influence their everyday geographic experiences from their own and their parents' perspectives.

This chapter is organized into two parts. First, I summarize my major findings about children's everyday place exploration alone and supervised, as well as the factors affecting their exploration of the city, including parents' perceptions of the urban environment and individualized strategies for supervising their children's everyday activities. Second, I reflect on these findings in relationship to the larger body of contemporary work calling for the integration of the child and the city, and outline future possible educational and research directions about ways to support and better understand children's everyday geographies.

## **Summary of Findings**

The children with whom I worked went to most places with the permission of their parents whether they traveled alone around well-defined geographic areas near their homes and schools or supervised by adults to other places in their neighborhood and the city. However, this restriction was not homogenous across the children's urban experiences because of several factors: the child's individual characteristics, family circumstances such as parents' perceptions of the city and household income, and larger structural issues such as public disinvestment in the outdoor environment and the consequences of gentrification on children's access to diverse social and cultural environments. While a few of those participating in my study were independent place explorers (n=4), most of them were supervised to different degrees in their exploration near and far (n=14).

### **Independent exploration of places near homes and schools**

Most of the children went independently to places near their homes and schools with friends and/or siblings without direct adult supervision, and explored within a parent-defined range. They went with friends to residential places, parks and playgrounds, commercial places (stores, restaurants), and institutional places (museums, zoos) near their homes and schools. Some children, especially girls, were supervised at a distance by adults, but went to residential places close to their homes. More boys walked to school alone than girls, giving them more freedom to explore the environment. Four of the children, mainly boys, whom I refer to as "independent explorers," were not

supervised by adults as they went to more varied places in their neighborhood, including residential places, commercial places, institutional places, and the park and playgrounds. They went to these places even without friends or any indirect adult supervision. As such, these few children had the most extensive spatial ranges alone. In terms of class status, the upper middle class children were more likely to be restricted in their access to places without adult supervision, and thus had limited independent mobility around their homes and schools than the middle and working class children in this study.

### **Supervised exploration of places in and beyond neighborhood**

Adult supervision helped most of the children expand their spatial range and place exploration activities in the neighborhood. As a result, most children were quite familiar with most commercial places, parks and playgrounds, residential places, and institutional places in Park Slope. The three places which stood out in their neighborhood place exploration were (1) residential, especially friends' homes; (2) commercial, especially those community-oriented and child-friendly stores participating in the Safe Haven Program, and (3) parks, especially Prospect Park which offers access to a range of scarce resources such as open space, quiet and tranquil spaces, places for physical activities, a substantial body of water, an ice skating rink, and an environment for science inquiry. There was less of a gender difference in the children's exploration when adults supervised them in their journeys to these three types of places. Most of the children's experiences were very similar and were reported by their parents in similar ways, making clear that most parents knew exactly the distant places their children explored in the neighborhood.

As children explored places beyond their neighborhood, the level of adult supervision increased (parents and/or school staff). Not surprisingly, children's exploration of places was more disparate and uneven in the larger urban environment than in their neighborhood, and consisted of repetitive and layered trips to educational, landmark, and commercial places, focused primarily in Brooklyn and Manhattan. Some children never visited places in Queens and Staten Island. Such trips were mainly educational or for entertainment purposes. Household income played a role in children's exploration of places in the broader urban environment thanks to the expenses of accessing places in the city. Not surprisingly, then, the children from wealthier households went to more places in the broader urban environment than those from less well-off homes, although the differences between middle and upper class children's exploration of the city were not as distinct, as most engaged somewhat in similar explorations. School trips helped bring the resources of the city within reach of more children.

### **Factors affecting children's place exploration**

The factors that affected children's exploration of places around their homes, schools, and local neighborhood were related to children's individual characteristics, environmental and social abilities, family circumstances, and their sense of the larger structure of the urban environment. These often interrelated and transactional factors emanating from the physical and social environment, such as children's lack of ability to negotiate dense traffic areas like Grand Army Plaza and parental fears of the urban environment and the restrictions these fears engendered, informed the everyday

structuring, support, and limitation of children's place exploration in the urban environment.

### **Individual level**

Children were not passive users of the urban environment, especially when they were encouraged to demonstrate their social and environmental abilities in the pursuit of autonomous exploration of places in the neighborhood. "It is crucial to think of children's spatial ranges as the product of negotiation between parent and child, not as the expression of a child's desire only, or as an expression of a parent's total domination ..." (Hart, 1979, p. 339). The few children who were able to independently explore places in their neighborhood shared some of the following individual characteristics:

- Had access to an extensive network of friends (including adults) near their homes and in the neighborhood.
- Were given responsibilities and were trusted to be able to negotiate both the social and physical environment on their own to a certain degree, and were involved in the management of their households by running errands, and doing various chores.
- Were characterized by their parents as being outdoor children with a desire to explore and know the places in the urban environment.
- Were gradually expressing their emerging environmental and social preferences to their parents, and asking to be taken to places like arcades, sports arenas, videogame stores, and other digital technology places like the Sony building rather than educational places like museums.

With such characteristics, children demonstrated a certain degree of confidence and ability to deal with the urban environment on their own. However, children's agency is of course mediated by their family circumstances and the decisions and actions of their parents.

### **Family circumstances**

Children's family circumstances were key to understanding the dynamic aspects that influenced their exploration of the city. These explorations of the city were dependent on the following interrelated family characteristics: (1) parent perception of the urban environment and level of fearfulness about the environment; (2) household income; (3) familiarity with various areas of the city; and (4) schedules.

Parent perceptions of the urban environment were often dichotomous: an environment rich in educational and cultural resources was at the same time seen as an environment rife with safety issues that most 10-year-old children could not confidently deal with on their own. Both the neighborhood and the city were perceived as culturally and educationally valuable environments in which to raise children. However, these benefits were mitigated by perceptions of what makes city life difficult for parents such as fears of crime, bullying, and automobile traffic density present in the broader urban environment, the negative consequences of gentrification on the cultural and economic diversity of their community, and stimulation overload in the urban environment.

Parent perceptions of urban fear varied based on whether they grew up in a city or a suburban/rural environment. While parents who grew up in New York City believed that the city was relatively safe for children and discounted the ideology of fear

propagated by the media, parents who grew up in suburban and rural areas were very worried about safety in relation to their children's use of the urban environment.

Although the perceptions of the parents who grew up in New York City did not translate into greater freedom to explore the broader urban environment for their children, it afforded their children at least more freedom in the local environment and enhanced their children's strong sense of place attachment and identity through place appreciation and supervised exploration of the broader urban environment. These parents, who adopted a realistic approach to public safety issues, were confident in their abilities to read the complex urban landscape and the safety issues in them, and teach these skills to their children. The goal was to reduce their children's anxiety about the challenges of negotiating the urban environment, fostering competent urban dwellers through the appreciation of the quality and history of different landmarks and places in the city.

Household income played a role in children's exploration of places in the broader urban environment in terms of the high financial cost of accessing places in the city. The cost of event entry, transportation, and other incidentals, as well as for babysitters if necessary, had predictable varying effects on children from different economic backgrounds. Wealthier families were able to accommodate their children's widening place preferences and interests with greater ease than other households were.

School played a critical role in children's independent exploration of places in the neighborhood. Most of the children were allowed to go to lunch at local neighborhood restaurants and walk from school to their homes without adult supervision. Few children were not allowed to walk to school alone because of the combination of distance between school and home, and the level of traffic density on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. School also expanded

children's exposure to places beyond the neighborhood, especially for the working class children through organized class trips.

Some of the parents acknowledged that all the demands on their time and their children's time limited their ability to take their children to places in the city more often. Finding time on their already busy family schedules to go on trips around the city was challenging considering the following realities:

- Most parents need planning time to access the larger urban environment.
- Most children were often busy with schoolwork after regular school hours, after-school programs during the week, and organized sports during weekends.
- It was not always easy to find a babysitter or relatives or friends who can look after younger siblings during weekends.
- On weekends most parents must run errands and take their children to organized sports or other activities around the neighborhood.

Some of the parents felt that Park Slope had most of the needed resources for their children's place exploration such as zoos, parks and playgrounds, museums, the botanical garden, and varied commercial places. These qualities of the neighborhood and the feeling of living in a self-sufficient area of Brooklyn made it feel less necessary for them to take their children to places outside the neighborhood.

The issue of lack of time was more difficult for those parents who were not familiar with various areas of the city or well-informed about events for children and families in Staten Island, Queens, and the Bronx. Further, some of their perceptions of

boroughs like Staten Island were negative and were shared with their children. However, the few parents in this study who were originally from New York City tried to focus more on instilling in their children a sense of what it means to be a New Yorker, a strong sense of historical place identity that can help the child develop broad affective and cognitive pursuits related to specific types of places in their broader contexts (Weinstein & David, 1987).

### **Larger urban factors**

The larger urban factors affecting children's place exploration were related to the city's ongoing urban restructuring processes such as the consequences of gentrification on the cultural and economic diversity of city neighborhoods, the disinvestment in public provision for children's play environments, the inadequacy of public transportation systems in the city during weekends, and the high cost of entry to many educational and cultural institutions. These large urban factors had negative consequences even on well off neighborhoods like Park Slope. Some of the parents indicated that their neighborhood lacked engaging and safe play environments for children of different age levels around their homes and schools.

Another set of factors that parents believed played a role in their children's place exploration was the high level of noise and stimuli overload in the city. These environmental factors made it hard for 10-year-old children to focus on what's going on around them and for parents to monitor their children. Because of these factors and fears of the social dangers present in the urban environment, parents tended to supervise their children more closely in the broader urban environment. As a result of this mix of

concerns, visits to places outside the neighborhood and its environs were relatively limited on annual basis.

### **Parents' different strategies for place exploration**

Parents were not passive in the face of these urban challenges, and tried their best to provide their children with opportunities to explore their complex and challenging urban environment independently. They were aware that their children needed to be environmentally and socially competent to explore the urban environment alone, and developed a range of concrete individualized strategies to deal with the safety and other issues this raised. Among these strategies were staying in regular contact via telephone, broadening children's community ties, and consulting with other parents about safety issues relative to specific and spontaneous circumstances. In addition to enrolling their children in the Safe Haven program and discussing with other parents about what was safe and unsafe for 10-year-old urban children, parents talked to their children about how to negotiate meeting people they did not know, walk on neighborhood streets, request what they needed, and get home safely. A step-by-step process was commonly used, such as supervising the child at gradually greater distances and training him or her in how to cross streets and avenues safely. Other less commonly used strategies were more spontaneous, such as allowing children to explore a new area on their own within a parentally defined range or letting them go to a new location for a specific purpose. Parents continuously assessed these experiences in order to provide balanced support and guidance for their children's healthy independent exploration of places in the neighborhood.

Related to the above safety strategies were parents' enactment and administration of rule-based spatial strategies to guide and support children's autonomous use of the indoor and outdoor environment and provide some order in children's management of their time in and outside the home, which all had consequences on children's place exploration. These rules all revolved primarily around issues of safety, comportment, privacy, mutual respect, etc. Families' indoor rules were designed to impart to the child some responsibilities in the orderly management of the household and their own time after-school and on weekends. These rules included doing their homework before engaging in other activities, not making noise and not playing in certain areas of their house, respecting other household members' property and spaces, and maintaining the safety and security of the home by not letting strangers in or playing with matches.

Two approaches to the enactment and administration of outdoor rules were observed in the families participating in this study: (1) a rule-bound approach and (2) a pragmatic approach. In the first approach, which was commonly used and informed more by urban safety issues, than by children's place preferences and abilities, parents had a lot of specific rules and allowed autonomous play only in limited, parentally defined spaces just outside the home, such as building stoops, sidewalks and streets. Other rules included not traveling outside of defined geographic boundaries alone, not dealing with strangers under any circumstances, respecting traffic lights, and letting their parents know their whereabouts on a regular basis. In the second approach, which was less commonly used and was informed by a sense that the urban environment was relatively safe, parents provided a platform for negotiating spatial rules to children, had a more limited number of specific rules, and focused on discussion of safety issues in the

context of each unique situation that they had to experience. With this approach, children were expected to determine on their own what was acceptable and unacceptable behavior outside their homes and understand the consequences of their actions. These rules were used by parents to teach them about the fluidity of the urban environment, which limited the efficacy of pre-set and specific rules and required continuous re-assessment and engagement if one was to ensure some level of safety and protection for him/herself. As a result, children whose parents adopted the pragmatic approach to rule enactment and administration had more opportunities to explore places in the neighborhood on their own as compared to the children who lived in the rule-bound environment. Overall, family outdoor rules restricted the territorial range of girls more than boys.

These individualized strategies were all locally based at the neighborhood, home, and individual child levels, and did not deal with the issue of accessing the large-scale urban environment. They did not *fully* address parents' perennial questions about when and how to let go of their children, and children's strong desire to be independent explorers of places beyond their homes and schools, which participants in this study believed afforded children great fun and a sense of responsibility for their actions in the environment. All of these experiences underscored the restrictions placed upon 10-year-old children's intensified urges to explore the city, and the importance of understanding and addressing the larger economic, social, political, and physical urban forces influencing children's place exploration.

In sum, I believe that my research findings about children's place exploration and the factors affecting their exploration of the city contribute to the growing body of work in the field of children's geographies, which tackles the complexity of children's

independent interactions with the urban environment. As I demonstrated in this study, 10-year-old urban children were not all restricted. Even the restricted children were afforded opportunities to explore places in the city. Furthermore, they were not only exploring the environment with increased adult supervision but were also provided guidance and support in becoming competent urban explorers. Urban children's exploratory zone should be conceived as a space where children and elders negotiate the physical and social environment. Children are spending a lot of time with adults in various outdoor spaces, but are almost always trying to extend the realms of their activities and explorations. Adults have become part of the equation in children's independent place exploration. This proximity to children is in line with what the socio-culturalists refer to as the Zone of Proximal Development after Vygostky. The socio-culturalists' perspective postulates that development occurs when children interact actively with their physical and socio-cultural environment, and are guided in the exploration process by supportive and knowledgeable adults. From this perspective, place exploration is a pedagogical tool bridging the gap between children's school learning and out of school experiences. As such, place exploration can be a powerful tool in children's everyday modes of learning. The ideal situation for its use would be to have parents do less of the surveillance of their children in the outdoor environment and engage more in the exploratory process with them.

## **Implications**

The implications of this study are framed in relation to the growing number of restrictions placed on children's independent ability to explore the city, and the ways this

limits their access to play and other opportunities in the outdoor environment (Katz, 2004; Chawla, 2002; Hart, 2002; Lennard & Crowhurst-Lennard, 2000; Bartlett et al., 1999). These implications are focused on three aspects critical to the full integration of children into the city: (1) the planning and design of cities responsive to children's needs; (2) community- and school-based initiatives geared toward providing greater safety in cities and awareness about the qualities of cities; and (3) directions for future research initiatives.

### **Planning and design of cities**

Parents want their children to be active explorers of the city. They experiment with a lot of strategies to ensure, to the best of their abilities, that their children engage safely with places in the city. They recognize their children's strong needs to independently explore places in search of stimulation, security, and a sense of place identity (Aitken, 1994; Hart, 1979; Moore, 1990; Weinstein & David, 1987; Wridt, 2004). It has been demonstrated that children who were given more freedom to play with rich materials and explore their environment were intellectually and socially more competent in the classroom and schoolyard than restricted children (Pine, 1973). Thus, why are cities not planned and designed to address children's basic needs to explore independently and safely?

*“The modern city ... has failed to cater [to children's] insatiable desire for play.... I don't want a Childhood City. I want a city where children live in the same world as I do. If we seek a shared city, rather than a city where unwanted patches are set aside to contain children and their activities.... If the claim of children to share the city is admitted, the*

*whole environment has to be designed and shaped with their needs in mind ...” (Ward, 1978, p. 204).*

I wholeheartedly subscribe to Ward’s conclusions and desires for the urgent recognition and optimum support of children’s needs for place exploration in the urban environment by city government and others. I believe the unwillingness to address this collaborative planning and design issue in any systemic way has far-reaching consequences on children’s place exploration and general development as healthy urban dwellers, especially in cities like New York where the disinvestment in children’s play provision has been steady and continuous. Between 1990 and 2006, the total staff of the New York City Department of Park and Recreation decreased 58% in the following key areas: management and administration (68%), maintenance and operation (61%), and recreation service (66%) (New Yorkers For Parks, 2006) (see Table 9). “By the mid-1990s, less than 4 percent of city capital funds and less than .6 percent of its operating budget was spent on parks. The political, economic, and fiscal climate of late-twentieth-century New York made it unlikely that these figures would increase in the foreseeable future” (Katz, 2004, p. 172).

Table 9: Percent Decrease of New York City Park and Recreation Staff

	<b>STAFF</b>			
	<b>Management &amp; Administration</b>	<b>Maintenance &amp; Operation</b>	<b>Recreation Service</b>	<b>Department of Park &amp; Recreation</b>
Total Percent Decrease	68%	61%	66%	58%

Source: New Yorkers For Parks (2006).

Furthermore, the New York City Board of Education has drastically reduced its involvement in the provision of play and recreation resources and activities over the years. “In 1957, the Department of Education was allocating \$5,817,262 for its recreation department. ... By 1967 however, there were no funds available for recreation in the New York City Department of Education and recreation activities were eliminated” (Hart, 2000, p. 7). The New York City Department of Education is not involved in addressing children’s recreational needs today (Katz, 2004; Hart, 2002 & 2000). In addition to the lack of public funding, as demonstrated in this study, urban children’s lack of opportunities to independently explore the outdoor environment was also due to parental fears, lack of rich and stimulating play environments in their neighborhoods, increased traffic density without provision to safeguard children’s use of streets, increased commercialization of children’s play spaces, busy parents and overscheduled children, and the cost of accessing the city. The perspective of parents and children are often not taken into account in the planning and design process of children’s outdoor spaces. “The greatest weakness in the history of play provision in New York City is that government has never tried to find a way of talking with children or even to observe what they like and do not like in their play choices” (Hart, 2002, p. 147). Hart (2002) explains the benefits of children’s and communities’ active participation in the planning, design, and maintenance of play environments, which have yielded positive results thus far, but he is quick to warn that there are limits to community participation.

*It is not appropriate for city government to use this as an excuse to avoid its own sustained commitment. ... Any city wishing to improve its planning of public spaces with children in mind needs to develop and present to the public a clear vision of why children's play is important to its citizens (Hart, 2002, p. 148).*

As Ward (1978) argued almost thirty years ago in the conclusion of his book, *The Child in the City*, the problem is not lack of knowledge about the issue, but public officials' and urban planners' lack of concrete and full support for the development of rich urban environments children's independent exploration and play. Today, a large body of research and models exist that provide large-scale and systemic solutions for tackling the continuous isolation of children in the urban environment. We know much more about how to create child-friendly environments that meet the optimal development needs of children at different ages (see Bartlett et al., 1999; Chawla, 2002; Christensen & O'Brien, 2002; de Winter, 1997; Driskell, 2001; Gortlitz et al., 1998; Hart, 2002, 2000 & 1997; Malone, 2001 & 1999; Satterthwaite et al., 1996). In some exceptional cases, children's advocates, researchers, children themselves, and government officials have come together to develop programs such as closing off residential streets for children's use in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom and providing adventure play areas in city parks in Japan (Hart, 2002).

### **Community and school based initiatives**

In a relatively safe neighborhood like Park Slope with access to a "flagship park" and a wealth of educational and play environments compared to many New York City

neighborhoods, one might assume that children's outdoor spaces and their access to a rich multicultural community would have been shielded from the negative consequences associated with city life in the mid 1990s. But even in this relatively well resourced neighborhood, children's ability to explore was still entangled in a web of constraining social, economic, and physical factors. Among the issues compromising children's integration into the larger environment as citizens in their own rights were traffic safety issues, limited community-based safety initiatives, and parents' limited use of educational programs about the urban environment. Children cannot explore the environment independently if they do not feel safe and knowledgeable about it.

In the face of limited funding for the provision of safe and educative outdoor urban environments for children of different age groups, there are some community-based initiatives focused on creating safe public spaces such as the Safe Haven program. While the latter program was referred to and relied on by some parents in this study, the Brooklyn Center for Urban Education (BCUE), which is located in Prospect Park, works with schools and the public. Although it was not mentioned by any of the parents in this study, BCUE has a long-term relationship with PS 321, one of the schools where I recruited most of the children in this study. It provides support to science teachers in conducting science experiments in Prospect Park. In addition, it organizes neighborhood tours of building and open space landmarks in Brooklyn during weekends to raise young people's and adults' educational awareness about the rich ecology of urban environments. Another useful area for their work might be outreach with neighborhood families. Their activities are publicized in schools and local neighborhood newspapers in Brooklyn. There is not only a need for more of these programs, but also greater visibility of existing

programs, which are valuable in their modest efforts in supporting children's knowledge and appreciation of the urban environment throughout the city.

In order to further integrate children into the urban landscape by supporting their safe geographic exploration and in-depth understanding of such complex environments, schools have an important role to play, especially for children from underserved communities. As this study showed, working class children's place exploration was mostly restricted to their neighborhood. This situation is much more severe in New York neighborhoods with a majority of poor and working class families.

*[The families] could see their declining value in the dilapidated conditions of the city's public schools, in the city's litter, which is strewn in poorly maintained neighborhood parks and playgrounds, and in the unsafe and decaying public spaces of the residential city (Katz, 2004, p. 159).*

In this context, it is crucial to supply more funding to schools so they can increase their environmental education courses based on some of the ideas advanced by educators like Froebel (1887), Dewey (1991), and Sprague Mitchell (1991). These authors call for a truly integrated formal and informal learning system that acknowledges children's urge to test themselves, use their physical abilities, and comprehend the natural and built environments they live in that contribute to their "normal" social and intellectual growth. In my study, most of the place exploration by working class children in the broader urban environment was afforded by school trips and other school-based activities. Some of the teachers at PS 321 used Prospect Park as a science laboratory for their students, who were also encouraged to conduct field studies with their families in the park. By making visible some of the processes through which children autonomously explore the urban

environment and the various factors affecting these experiences, I hope that I have contributed to some extent to current educational efforts attempting to support and build upon children's curiosity about their environment, children's desire to learn and play in outdoor settings, and children's ability to modify the environment and find their way in it (Hart, 1979; Katz, 2004 & 1986; Middlebrooks, 1998, Moore, 1990).

### **Directions for future research**

Further elaboration of the ways children explore the urban environment and validation of the factors identified in this study as affecting these experiences suggest opportunities for future research. First would be to examine the concept of place exploration with a larger population of children from middle and working class families. Second would be to examine the role of rules in children's outdoor place exploration along the lines of Wood and Beck's (1994) work in the context of a single indoor space. Third would be to develop a methodological approach using maps to capture the subtleties of children's place exploration in the everyday life settings of home, neighborhood, and the larger urban environment.

I believe that a study on place exploration with urban children from underserved communities might yield different results not only in terms of culture and socio-economic differences but also in terms of parents' perceptions of the urban environment, parental rules, and children's patterns of exploration. It would be worthwhile and interesting to determine what sorts of different experiences there children have of the urban environment and how their parents establish and enforce rules for their exploration.

Based on my experience, I think their exploration of the large scale environment would be limited.

A review of the literature revealed few systematic and in-depth investigations about the role of social and spatial rules in children's everyday geographies. Family rules were crucial in understanding children's outdoor place exploration because they were the most direct and concrete tools that parents used to structure children's territorial ranges and activities in the neighborhood. Parents' perceptions and fears were translated into rule-based strategies, which in many ways guided their children's experiences of the outdoor urban environment. As Wood and Beck (1994) asked at the beginning of *Home Rules*, "What is home for a child but a field of rules? (p. 1). The same question might be asked about the neighborhood in future studies focusing on the specific relationships among the forms of the neighborhood in terms of values and meanings, "do's and don'ts," and the material embodiment of rules through the lens of children's individual characteristics, families' demographic backgrounds and childrearing practices, and parents' and children's perceptions of the urban environment. In addition, Wood and Beck's use of a combination of photographs and semiotic readings of seventy "objects" in one single room to provide detailed descriptions of the meanings and workings of rules in a specific setting might be replicated in in-depth studies of the impact that rules have on children's use of the outdoor environment. Understanding how rules explicitly or implicitly normalize, support, or restrain children's exploration of the outdoor environment would provide a fascinating and useful addition to our understanding of children's environmental and social engagements.

Cities and children are challenging objects of study. To understand their relationship in the context of children's place exploration requires taking into account a range of factors such as the rapid, unpredictable, or continuously changing nature of cities; cities' socio-cultural, economic, and physical diversity; the number and quality of resources for children in a neighborhood; household income; parents' perceptions of the urban environment; parental rules; and children's developmental abilities and emerging needs. These parameters are often interrelated in everyday life settings and operate at different ecological levels across the home, neighborhood, and larger urban environment in myriad ways. While I was able to account for the restrictive state of children's place exploration around the home and school in the city, and some of the factors facilitating or impeding this process using an ecological approach, collecting and aggregating the data from print maps and interviews was tedious and cumbersome. Further, I feel that the data from the print maps was somewhat disconnected from the interview data and presented readability issues. These two different media can be more fully integrated using new advanced digital technologies and software. For example, additional studies in this area might consider the use of adapted versions of the Geographic Information System (GIS) software with children and parents during the data collection phase, which may make the provision of more detailed information more engaging to participants, help make the data analysis phase more manageable, and create more detailed and legible maps for illustrative purpose. Some versions of the GIS software can be designed in such a way that research participants can create their own maps, manipulate the data on their maps, track changes over time, and have spaces for writing their thoughts about the process of everyday exploratory behavior. The flexibility of the software allows the simultaneous

documentation of children's geographic experiences at different scales and their reflections on these experiences, and thus, can help researchers capture rich qualitative data readily useful for analyzing and reporting purposes. In addition, most of these types of software have databases, which can accommodate contextual demographic, economic, political, and physical information, which is critical in a comprehensive and coherent understanding of children's experience of the urban environment.

Making cities livable spaces for children's healthy development, and the provision of safe and manageable places for their exploration needs and the development of their place identity, requires not only new theories and research agendas but also the political will and financial backing necessary to restructure the landscape of cities in systemic ways that would afford *quality* exploration opportunities for all children, and therefore all people.

## **POSTSCRIPT<sup>7</sup>** **A CONTEMPORARY URBAN CHILDHOOD**

Given that my dissertation findings are based on data collected almost ten years ago, I chose to write a postscript to this study about my own 10-year-old child, whom I refer to as Cherif, as a means of establishing the relevance of my findings to urban children's place exploration today. By comparing his place exploration with the children who participated in my study and reflecting on the evolving concepts of childhood and place exploration, I have confidence that not much has changed in the business of growing up in New York City. In fact, Cherif's place exploration of the city is very similar to the middle class children in my study, especially the boys I referred to as independent explorers. His experiences differ from theirs in two key contextual respects: the advent of digital technologies in the home, and the increased commercialization of children's play spaces in neighborhoods around the country since the mid-1990s.

Before I share more about his place explorations, it is important to provide some background about Cherif and our family. Cherif has a biracial, middle class background (his mother is a white American from a New England city and I'm a Black immigrant from a large city in Senegal). Both parents work full-time. We, his parents, work in the field of educational research with keen interest in issues of child and community development as well as social justice. By the time Cherif turned ten years old, he had lived in a range of different housing types, mostly in rented apartments in Carroll Gardens and Park Slope, Brooklyn. We bought a house in Cobble Hill before Cherif

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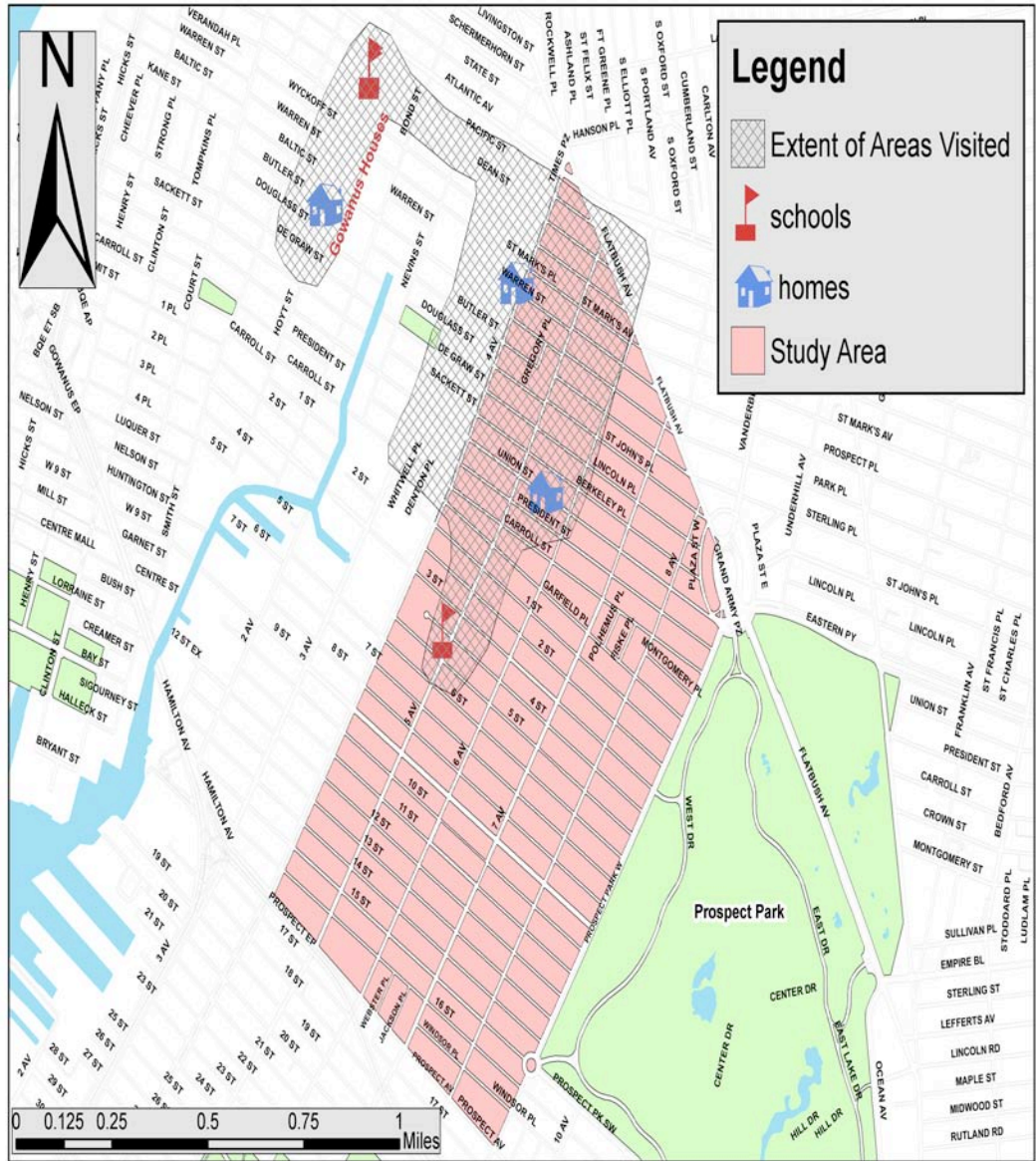
<sup>7</sup> Cherif and his mother reviewed this postscript for accuracy.

started elementary school. This house was a distance of 50 feet from the Gowanus Housing Project. In the first three years after our move, there was a lot of drug sale activity taking place in front our house, along with a number of shootings in the housing project. This situation decreased over time, perhaps because middle class families started to move to the area as it gentrified, and the police presence in and around the housing project increased. Even before these changes, we felt relatively safe where we lived, and tried to know and have friendly chats with most of our neighbors, including the drug dealers.

Our decision to remain in the city cost our son some friends because some of his friends' parents decided to move to the suburbs to get access to better school systems. We chose to raise him in an urban environment because of our familiarity with the city and deep belief that it has a richness in terms of social, cultural, and economic diversity that other places like the suburbs and rural areas cannot offer him. While the urban environment carries risk, we do not buy into the "terror talk" about children and the urban environment that is commonly raised in the news media. We see the city as a relatively safe place when approached with the right frame of mind. Our focus is on imparting in him a sense of social and physical competence and a healthy grasp of the local environment, not creating a fear of the outdoors or his various social environments. Thus, we have limited rules about his use of our home's indoor spaces and the outdoor spaces around it. While our perspective of the urban environment is less restrictive than most of the parents in my study, it is still restrictive, especially relative to our personal experience of having grown up in environments where we were allowed to explore independently and extensively in urban surroundings.

Cherif, who just turned 12, attended three years of daycare while we lived in Park Slope, and then went to a public elementary school (K-5) located five blocks from our house in Cobble Hill. When he turned five, he was joined by a baby brother. When he turned 10, we were divorced. We share custody of the children, who live with their mother in Park Slope half of the week, and with me in Saint George, Staten Island, the other half. Cherif continues to have strong ties to the Park Slope neighborhood where he is presently attending middle school. Having been raised in two adjacent neighborhoods (Park Slope and Cobble Hill), attended three separate formal education institutions (daycare, elementary, and middle school) and summer camps, as well as participated in organized sports from a young age (starting at 4 years old), Cherif has access to a substantial network of friends in both neighborhoods, and is familiar with most places and landmarks in this part of Brooklyn (see Figure 19). In our Cobble Hill house, he had access to a large gated side yard (25 x 100 feet), a bike, a skateboard, a scooter, and friendly multicultural neighbors. In addition, he is a very active and sociable child, who enjoys playing sports as well as electronic and computer games, reading books, watching TV, and being in the outdoor environment. Although digital technologies were increasingly invading American homes in the late 1990s, this major contextual change did not affect him at age 10. For example, he did not have access to a PlayStation, Gamecube, cell phone and the Internet when he was 10-year-old. He got access to these digital tools much later.

Figure 20: Father's Sense of Cherif's Alone Places with Peers



Cherif was as overscheduled as most of the children in my study. He was required to get his homework done and practice on the piano during school days before playing any games in the side yard or on the computer or watching TV, and went to bed at the same time most nights. We did not have any restrictions about how he used the different spaces inside the house, and he did not do any chores, except that he helped with maintaining the garden, which he didn't do consistently. As he grew up, his organized play activities intensified and were spread out throughout the calendar year: soccer in the fall, baseball in the spring and summer, and basketball in the winter. He had music classes after school once a week, participated in after-school programs at school, and had play dates with friends almost every weekend and sleepovers at least once a month. This situation required a great deal of our time in terms of getting him to places and supervising him, especially outside the immediate areas near our home.

Cherif's early independent forays consisted of going to places near our home, mostly his friends' and neighbors' houses, going around the block, and walking to school. His independent exploration of the outdoor environment started in our gated side yard where he spent a considerable amount of time playing on his own or with friends, with little adult interference. It was fairly easy to check on him from our living room window or a side garden door when he was in the yard alone. From there he moved onto the sidewalk where he was allowed to ride his bike and use his skateboard and scooter. He visited his friends' houses on the block alone, babysat our neighbor's cat, and went up and down the block without any direct adult supervision. Every time he played on the sidewalk on our block we would leave the front door to the house open so we could check on him every now and then. We would check on him about every 30 minutes

when he was 8 years old. He was not allowed to go beyond the sidewalk on our block or the side of our house, nor cross any street. To our knowledge, he never transgressed these rules regulating his early independent exploration of places around his home. As we grew confident that he was becoming socially and physically competent in the immediate outdoor environment of our home and street, we allowed him to expand his autonomous territorial range, which he requested prior to us granting him the permission. Each extension in his range was the result of negotiated settlements. Thus, he was able to cycle around the entire block without crossing any street, used his scooter by himself or with friends, and walked to the playgrounds located a block away from our house with friends even though they had to cross two streets to get there.

Like the children in my study, walking to school was an important event for him because he was able to demonstrate to us that he could do it on his own. He walked to his elementary school alone first from our house in Cobble Hill starting when he was 8 years old and then from his mother's house in Park Slope after our divorce. Walking to school from our house in Cobble Hill was less challenging because he did not have to contend with major avenues and heavy car traffic on his way to school, going around the block, or getting to the playgrounds closest to our house. Other families and their children (most of them were in his school) used these streets during the same time he used them. Walking to his school in Cobble Hill from Park Slope was much more challenging because he had to negotiate at least six streets and one two-way avenue with dense car traffic. He relied on crossing guards to get to school safely. He was well versed in crossing streets, in being focused when on the way home from school, and in being aware of what was going on around him because of years of our walking him to

different places in the neighborhood. Though his main concern when he was 8 years old was about social comfort, that is, not getting bullied by older children (which never happened), these early experiences enabled him to prove to us and to himself that he could negotiate going to places in the neighborhood alone. We continuously instructed him about how to negotiate the social and physical environment by asking him to respect the traffic lights, and to be aware of motorists and other things going on around him while walking alone in the neighborhood. Unlike the children in my study, he did not have the opportunity to explore places alone from school because the administrators at his elementary school did not allow the children to leave the premises or get lunch at nearby restaurants.

When he started going to middle school in Park Slope at the age of ten and half years old, he walked or took public transportation (bus) to get to school, which was located 10 blocks from his mother's house. On the days when he stayed with me, Cherif was taken to school by car Staten Island. During his trips to school from Park Slope, he went alone or with friends. He was allowed to get lunch at nearby restaurants in middle school, which gave him the opportunity to go to places along 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue without adult supervision. As such, Cherif's independent territorial range was very similar to the independent explorers in my study, who traveled similar ranges in Park Slope alone.

The rest of his place exploration in the city was *totally* supervised by us or other adults, and was very similar to the experiences of most of the children in my study. He was familiar with commercial and entertainment places (restaurants, stores, and movie theaters), and the few poorly equipped play areas in his Cobble Hill neighborhood. In these play areas, he was able to ride his bike or scooter, play basketball, run around, use

the play structures to climb, swing, slide, etc., and meet and interact with other children from the neighborhood and the housing projects nearby. The furthest place he went to in this neighborhood was to the house of his music teacher located 8 blocks from our house. He was often driven there because the trips required crossing streets with heavy traffic flow and going on an overpass over the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway.

As with the children in my study, Cherif's experience of places in the city is imbalanced. Outside the neighborhood, he went to more places in Brooklyn than in Manhattan, Queens, Staten Island, and the Bronx. In Brooklyn, he continues to expand his familiarity with commercial, public, private, and entertainment places—play areas like the Parade Grounds, educational institutions like the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn Botanical Garden, Prospect Park and its zoo, public libraries, and residential places like his and our friends' homes. He also continues to expand his understanding of the geographic relationships among these places, which were located in Carroll Gardens, Cobble Hill, Park Slope and the surrounding areas. He is less familiar with places located outside this general area. These less frequented distant places are commonly (1) cultural institutions, such as the Bronx Zoo, museums in Manhattan, the Brooklyn Children's Museum, the aquarium in Coney Island, the zoo and children's museum in Staten Island, and landmark places, such as the Empire State Building; (2) commercial and entertainment centers, such as Yankee and Shea Stadiums, the Broadway theater district, and movie theaters and malls in Staten Island. He went to these more distant places with us or on school trips. In addition to this general experience and sense of the city, he's also familiar with how to get from Park Slope to my house in Staten Island because he provided directions to his friends' parents on a few occasions.

This imbalanced experience of places in the city was due to (1) our lack of time on weekends because of running household chores, attending social functions, and overseeing his busy after-school life, especially with organized sports and play dates; and (2) a combination of few entertaining diversions in our immediate social and physical surroundings, increased availability of commercial play spaces in the area, and greater access to electronic and computer games in most places in his life, including home. In the last 10 years, as digital technologies and commercialized play spaces have moved increasingly into homes and neighborhoods, children's already limited opportunity to engage in place exploration in the outdoor environment seems to have been further reduced. This invasion of digital technologies and commercialized play spaces was just burgeoning in the lives of the children with whom I worked in the mid-1990s, but even then I thought their experience of the outdoor urban environment was limited.

I can say with certainty and some guilt that this digital environment is a world that Cherif at age 12 definitely inhabits with his friends and brother. He concentrates his time during weekends on the use of digital technologies and electronic games available in our houses and at his friends' homes, and visits commercial play spaces equipped with electronic games, batting cages, basketball courts, mini soccer fields, and eating areas, which began surfacing in the areas surrounding Park Slope and Cobble Hill in the late 1990s. As he grew up, it became a way to get some relaxing moments at home, for us away from our work and daily parenting responsibilities and for him away from his overscheduled life of after-school programs and organized activities. This is the most common strategy that we rely on to keep him not only safe, but also help us all remain sane in an environment where children are not provided with the adequate engaging

environments to explore safely on their own. Thanks to the fairly unrelenting market forces behind the commercialization of play, it is fair to say that this option and related ones relied upon by parents help reinforce trends that reduce children's presence in the outdoor environment. Their attractiveness to young people and parents eases the pressure on families, cities, and local governments to provide systemic solutions to the structural economic and political forces that reduce or limit the availability of safe, attractive and engaging everyday urban geographies for children and families.

## **APPENDIX**

## Consent Form

Dear parent/guardian,

I am a graduate student in Environmental Psychology at the City University of New York and currently studying children's knowledge and exploration of places in New York City. As part of my requirements for a doctoral degree, I would like to interview twenty 10-year-old children (10 boys and 10 girls) for two one-hour sessions and their parents for one twenty minute session at a place and time convenient for you. With your permission, I will tape-record the interviews for later analysis. All participants will remain anonymous in my report of the research and the information gathered will be used only as part of general findings.

I would appreciate it if you would return the attached form to your child's teacher tomorrow, giving permission for you and your child to participate in the study. I will then ask your child if he or she would like to participate. Participation is completely voluntary. You or your child can withdraw from the study at any time. Participants may also review the tape of the interview if they wish.

My preliminary interviews indicate that children find these interviews enjoyable; and parents are usually eager to voice their concerns, feelings and thoughts about children growing up in New York City.

If you have any questions, call me at (718) 399-6727 or my advisor, Professor Cindi Katz at the Graduate Center City University of New York (212)-642-2568. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this study you can call Ms. Hilary Fisher at the Office of Sponsored Research.

Sincerely,

Harouna Ba  
Ph.D. Candidate

I \_\_\_\_\_ (parent's or guardian's name) agree to be interviewed and give permission for \_\_\_\_\_ (child's name) to be interviewed by Harouna Ba as a part of his study on children's place exploration in New York City. I understand that the interview will be tape-recorded, that our names will not be used in the report of the study, and that my child and I may withdraw from the study or refuse to participate at any time. I understand that I may contact Mr. Ba or his advisor or the Office of Sponsored Research with any questions or concerns I may have regarding our participation in the study.

Parent's or guardian's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I agree that the interviews can be tape recorded. Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I would greatly appreciate the following information:

Child's School \_\_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher's name \_\_\_\_\_

Please provide a telephone number where I can call you to arrange a time for an interview

\_\_\_\_\_

## Parent/Guardian's Interview Protocol

I am interested in your ideas about the different kinds of local places (e.g., places in Park Slopes; Brooklyn, Queens, Bronx, Staten Island, and Manhattan) in New York City that your child knows about and/or goes to. I also have some questions regarding your family and your ideas about child rearing. From my preliminary and informal conversations with parents, I noted that they are usually eager to voice their concerns, feelings and thoughts about children growing up in New York City. It is important for me to get this information and include it in my study in order to understand better children's place experiences in New York City.

If you are uncomfortable with a question, you do not have to answer it. There are 13 questions, which shouldn't take more than a half-hour, but you can stop anytime you wish. Your answers will be kept confidential and your name will not be used in my reports on this work.

I am interested in all the different places where you know your child goes. I will mark the places you name on this map. Feel free to name places or point them out on the map.

This is a map of your neighborhood. This is Prospect Park. Can you find your street, your house?" (If they cannot find them, I will familiarize them more with the neighborhood map.)

1. What are all of the farthest places your child goes?

**After each place is named, I will ask**

Are they allowed to go there?

If yes, why?

Under what conditions, are they allowed to go to ...

- alone?
- children around their age?
- with older children?
- with adults?

If no, why do you not want them to go there?

Under what conditions, are they allowed to go to ...

- alone?
- children around their age?
- with older children?
- with adults?

2. What are all the other places your child goes to in Park Slope?

**After each place is named, I will ask**

Are they allowed to go there?

If yes, why?

Under what conditions, are they allowed to go to ...

- alone?

- children around their age?
- with older children?
- with adults?

If no, why do you not want them to go there?

Under what conditions, are they allowed to go to ...

- alone?
- children around their age?
- with older children?
- with adults?

3. Do you have any rules about where your child goes? If yes, what are they? If no, why not?

How about rules about your child's use of indoor and outdoor areas?

4. Would you describe your child as one who likes to be indoors or one who likes to be outdoors?
5. What's his/her favorite activity?
6. How do you feel about the area you live in as a place for children? Can you please deal with "good" and "bad" things about this place?
7. How do you feel about New York City as a place for children? Can you please deal with "good" and "bad" things about this place?
8. What places in New York City do you take/have you taken your child? Why?
9. Is your child curious about places in New York City? What place (s) does s/he talk or ask about?

**Now I have a few questions about you and your family.**

10. How long has your family been living in this area?
11. Who are the adults in your household (Probe: number and relationship of adults)?
12. How many children do you have in your household (Probe: number, ages, and sex of children)?
13. What is the last year of school you completed? What about the other adults in your family?
14. What is your occupation? And your partner's?

## Child's Interview Protocol

I am a graduate student and as part of my work I am speaking with children about their experiences in New York City and different places where they go. I am interested in what children know about different places in New York City and where they go. I would like to ask you questions on this topic. There are no right or wrong answers. It's important that you answer the questions honestly, from your own experiences and tell me what you really think or feel. Anything you tell me will be kept private. No one else in the school or anywhere else will know about it. Your name will not be used in anything I write. You should feel free to stop the interview, if you do not understand a given question or want to end the interview.

Sex ..... Age ..... Grade ..... School .....

This is a map of Park Slope. This is Prospect Park. This is your school. Can you find your street, your house?" (If they cannot find them, I will familiarize them more with the neighborhood map.)

### I. Known Places

**1. Neighborhood Place knowledge.** Now, can you please tell me all the places that you know about in or near your neighborhood?

After the last place is named, I will ask: "Are there any others you want to add?"

Have you gone to \_\_\_\_\_?

#### a. Places known and gone to

If yes, were you allowed to go

- alone?
- with friends?
- with older kids?

What did you do there when you went to \_\_\_\_\_?

How did you get there?

How did you find out how to get there? (Probe: What led you to go there?)

How did you find out about it before going?

What would you tell another kid about this place? What do you like about this place? Why?

Why did you want to go there?

**b. Places known and not gone to**

If you didn't go to \_\_\_\_\_, why not?

How did you learn about this place?

What would you tell another kid about this place?

How do you feel about this place (fear, like and dislike)?

What would you like to know more about this place?

Would you like to go to this place?

**2. New York City Place Knowledge.** So, you've told me a lot of things about Park Slope. What about the rest of Brooklyn? What about New York City? Can you please tell me all the places that you know in New York City? (Probe about places in each borough).

After the last place is named in each borough, I will ask: "Are there any others you want to add?"

Have you gone to \_\_\_\_\_?

**a. Places known and gone to**

If yes, were you allowed to go

- alone?
- with friends?
- with older kids?

What did you do there when you went to \_\_\_\_\_?

How did you get there?

How did you find out how to get there? (Probe: What led you to go there?)

How did you find out about it before going?

What would you tell another kid about this place?

Why did you want to go there?

**b. Places known and not gone to**

If you didn't go to \_\_\_\_\_, why not?

How did you learn about \_\_\_\_\_?

What would you tell another kid about \_\_\_\_\_?

How do you feel about this place (fear, like and dislike)?

What would you like to know more about this place?

Would you like to go to this place?

(During the second interview with the maps with all the named places by the child, I will ask questions 1 & 2 for each place).

1. Did you ever ask questions about this place?

If yes, which one (s)? Whom did you ask?

What did you ask about this place?

2. Did you ever read anything about this place?

Can you tell me the places you know lot about? What do you know about them?

What are you most interested in or curious about in these places? Why?

Of all the places you named, which are your favorites? Why?

What s the farthest place you've been in New York City?

**II. Unknown Places**

Can you tell me anything about the blank areas on these maps?

Would you describe yourself as someone who likes to stay mostly indoors or someone who likes to stay mostly outdoors?

### Map of Park Slope



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